

THE NATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS: A CRITIQUE OF NATIONALISM IN
SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE

By

NIVEDITA MAJUMDAR

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FOR
MA AND BABA
WITH
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I am certain that I am not the only one who, while pursuing a doctoral degree, has wondered more than once if and when this dissertation will ever be completed. So now, being able finally to see the light at the end of the tunnel so clearly, it gives me immense pleasure to thank the many people who have made this moment possible.

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Nivedita Majumdar

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Chair: John P. Leavey, Jr
Major Department: English

This dissertation concerns the influence of nationalist ideology in the literature of disparate social groups in the Indian subcontinent. The birth of the Indian nation, following two centuries of colonial rule, held the promise of inclusion and development for all sectors of society. However, in the process of nation building, the needs and concerns of various groups are systematically marginalized. Nationalist ideology maintains its dominance by appeasing disparate groups constituting the nation at the same time as suppressing their actual interests and aspirations. The dominance of nationalist ideology, however, is not uncontested. The literature emerging from the subcontinent offers a rich record of the experience of marginalization of subaltern groups, their ideologies of resistance and visions of an alternative order. My critique of nationalism is based on the representation of the experiences and ideologies of four subaltern groups--women, religious minorities, "backward" castes and tribes, and emigrants--in the literature of the subcontinent.

The literary texts included in the project span from the early twentieth century--the period when nationalist consciousness was crystallized--to our present postcolonial period. I begin with a discussion of a novel by Rabindranath Tagore that sheds light on the complex ideological negotiations undertaken by the native elite in its attempt at constructing a paradigm of womanhood in the interests of the nation state. The nationalist appropriation of the gender issue at the formative stages of nationalist ideology paves the way for further explorations of the impact of the ideology on other aspects of civic society at a later stage, when nationalism gained its dominance. The discussion of the literature in the chapters that follow, representing religious minorities (Saadat Hasan Manto and Taslima Nasrin among others) and economically oppressed groups (Mahashweta Devi) highlight their oppositional relationship with the nation state. Finally, I locate a coherent critique of nationalism and alternative visions of social solidarity in contemporary Indian English literature (Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh).

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a newly decolonized nation. Ours was a generation raised with a keen awareness of our special place in history. We had to honor the legacy of two centuries of colonial rule and the heroic struggle against that regime. Born in a free and sovereign nation, we had neither suffered the horrors of colonialism nor were we a part of the war against it. So we were especially indebted to the nation for our good fortune. That debt was to be paid with our complete loyalty and vigorous commitment to the idea and the ideals of the nation. As citizens of a nation wedded to the ideals of freedom, democracy, socialism and secularism, the demand for loyalty and commitment was an honor. Or so we were given to understand.

I would have liked to believe in the egalitarian character of Indian nationhood. The post sixties decades, the India of my childhood and youth, however, made it hard to sustain any such faith. Debilitating poverty and fierce class inequalities, the horrors of caste oppression, the tyrannies of a patriarchal order, the ever-present tensions around religious identity did not make me question the legitimacy of the nation. All this was to be expected from a country recently recovering from centuries of colonial rule and one with a rich and variegated cultural past of its own. It was not so much the presence of, for instance, gender oppression, but the nation's approach to the issue that made me skeptical of nationalism. The nation's rhetoric of inclusive egalitarianism, I realized, did not match the reality of its numerous failed commitments. This project is a result of my disillusionment with nationalism, an ideology I was taught to revere.

Nationalist ideology emerged in the subcontinent as the mobilizing discourse against British rule. And in taking its place as the dominant mode of national cohesion, nationalism became the new normative force that claimed to represent the interests and aspirations of the whole nation. In so doing, nationalist ideology had to perform a double maneuver: it had to be sufficiently porous to allow disparate social groups and their interests to be incorporated into its fold; at the same time it had to suppress aspects of these other interests to make the process of incorporation consistent with the project of *nation-building*. The intricate, ideological process of nation-building is carried out by the *nation-state*, a political organ that, as John Dunn observes, is based on the institutional organization of force that derives its imaginative and moral justification from the idea of the nation.¹

This dissertation attempts to expose the dual process of marginalization and incorporation of disparate social groups in the service of the grand scheme of nation-building. I try to show how the process of nation-building culminates in the betrayal of the idea of the nation. My critique of nationalism is based on the representation of the experiences and ideologies of religious minorities, backward castes, women, and emigrants in the literature of the subcontinent. I focus on the literary representation of how the needs and concerns of subaltern groups in the nation are at once *appeased and marginalized* by the dominant nationalist discourse. The primary source of evidence for the project are literary texts produced in and about the subcontinent. I proceed from an understanding of literature that at once situates the (literary) text in its material context and also holds that, in a Lukacsian sense, the work's aesthetic potency allows it to wrest

¹ See John Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979)

free of ideological mediations and generate a more direct encounter with historical truths, and thereby facilitate critiques of dominant socioeconomic and ideological structures. It is also in literature that I locate alternative visions of the nation as indeed of social solidarity. There exists a robust body of political and theoretical critique of nationalism. Also, criticism relating literary texts to issues of nation and nationalism are increasingly being produced. However, this project in offering a theoretical critique of nationalist ideology based on literary discourse is an original contribution to the subject.

In the past two decades there has been vigorous scholarly exploration of the rise and nature of nationalism. This project implicitly draws on analyses that have sought to explain nationalism as a social and ideological construct. In his foundational study,² Ernest Gellner, for instance, locates the emergence of nationalism firmly within the modern, industrial age. He makes the interesting argument that the twin phenomena of sharp inequalities combined with the *promise* of Enlightenment egalitarianism characteristic of the modern era help to endanger the logic of nationalism. "The tension between desired equality and the unequal situation of industrialized society"³ is actualized when the ruled distinguish themselves from the rulers by seizing on symbols or a culture, which in the early stages of industrialism were material inequalities: "[W]hen one is unjustly treated and can identify other victims as being of the same nation as him, a nationalism is born."⁴ In another highly influential study,⁵ Benedict Anderson

² Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983)

³ Gellner p. 73-4

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983)

would agree with Gellner that nationalism is not the natural destiny of nations but it invents nations where they do not exist. Like Gellner, Anderson too locates the rise of nationalism in the modern industrial age. In Anderson's analysis, instead of uneven development, the prime catalyst for the birth of nationalism is "print capitalism." The new technology of communication--print--,by creating a unified field of exchange, facilitates the ideological creation of national communities.

Scholars have actively pursued the issue not only of the emergence but also of the nature of nationalism. Nationalism has often been viewed as a path to modernity.⁶ But it has also been proclaimed that nationalism is the hidden opponent of modern phenomena like colonialism and capitalism : "[t]o the forces in modernity pushing toward sameness and standardization, nationalism responded by defending difference."⁷ Such studies, while useful in shedding light on aspects of nationalist ideology, are limited in one crucial way. They overlook the fact that nationalism is not a unitary phenomenon but serves a number of different and even opposing purposes. It is not, as one commentator points out, "a thing, even an abstract thing, but a process, an implement."⁸ Nationalist ideology has been variously used as vindication of a culture or a tool to both aid and oppose oppressive regimes. Akeel Bilgrami is right in doubting that nationalism can be an explanatory concept at all. The variety of nationalisms, indeed the variety of ingredients that go into particular nationalisms at different stages and sometimes even at the same stage, makes this inevitable. As we have been routinely and rightly reminded in

⁶ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism : Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992)

⁷ Gregory Jusdanis, *The Necessary Nation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001) p. 6

⁸ Horace B. Davis, *Towards a Marxist Theory of Nationalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978) p.

other contexts, it would serve no purpose, for instance, to lump together, say, Palestinian nationalism with Zionist nationalism; or to lump together German nationalism in the following four periods: before 1848, after 1918, under Bismarck, and under Nazism... [It is misleading therefore] to give a central and clear place to some transparently grasped notion of 'nationalism.'⁹

Nationalism, I contend, is indeed very far from a single and transparent notion. One of my central aims is to show the *transformation* of the nature of Indian nationalism from a progressive ideology emerging from the anti-colonial struggles of the people to a tool of the national elite working against the very ideals that it encapsulated to begin with. Frantz Fanon's observations on the empty formalism of a nationalism that is devoid of popular energy and culture are of remarkable significance in this context:

A bourgeoisie that provides nationalism alone as food for the masses fails in its mission and gets caught up in a whole series of mishaps... The bourgeois leaders of under-developed countries imprison national consciousness in sterile formalism. It is only when men and women are included on a vast scale in an enlightened and fruitful work that form and body are given to that consciousness.... The living expression of the nation is the moving consciousness of the whole of the people ... the collective building of a destiny.... Otherwise there is anarchy, repression.... The national government, if it wants to be national, ought to govern by the people, for the people, for the outcasts and by the outcasts.¹⁰

In the South Asian context the Subaltern Studies collective have undertaken the much needed task of scrutinizing the role of the national bourgeoisie. The Subaltern project was initiated in the early eighties with the aim of radically reconceptualizing South Asian historiography. The project proceeds from the premise that the historiography of the region--colonialist and nationalist--suffers from an elitist bias. The

⁹ Akeel Bilgrami, "Two Concepts of Secularism: Reason, Modernity and the Archimedian Ideal" *Economic and Political Weekly* July 9 (1994) : 1751-52.

aim of the project is to thus rewrite South Asian history from the subaltern perspective.¹¹ The term "subaltern," drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings, refers to oppression in different forms like class, gender, language or culture. Indeed the centrality of the dominant/dominated relationship and more specifically the emphasis on civil society in Gramsci's works has been a formative influence for the scholars of the Subaltern project. By focusing on the experiences and ideologies of subaltern groups, these scholars attempt to show how in India the "key components of the modern nation state--political parties, the electoral process, parliamentary bodies, the bureaucracy, law, and the ideology of development--survived, but their claim to represent the culture and politics of the masses suffered crippling blows."¹²

In the spirit of the task undertaken by the Subaltern group, this project aims to foreground the growing gap between dominant Indian nationalism and the ideals and aspirations that it claims to incorporate. It is by suppressing the multifarious identities of people, based on work, religion, region, gender or beliefs and instead "interpellating" them as only Indians that nationalist ideology maintains its dominance. The dominance of nationalist ideology, however, like all ideologies, is open to contestations. These other ideologies that question nationalism are constitutive of people's experiences of marginalization, their everyday resistance to oppression and visions of an alternative order. Commenting on the nature of such oppositional ideologies, Ranajit Guha insightfully observes:

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1963; New York: Grove Press 1965) p. 164-5

¹¹ For an insightful and comprehensive overview of the subaltern project, see Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism" *American Historical Review* December (1994) : 1475-89.

¹² Prakash, p. 1476

Insofar as this challenge precedes the actual dissolution of the material basis of bourgeois dominance and the corresponding social and political structures, the critique is by its nature precocious, incomplete, and generally endowed with all the immaturity of a thing in its formative stage. But it is this very want of maturity that drives the critique audaciously, if not prudently in every instance, to probe those fundamental contradictions of the existing system which prefigure its demise.¹³

It is in literature that such oppositional ideologies—before they exert any influence, indeed before they are fully formed—make their appearance. Literature, in this sense, I suggest, does not merely reflect but helps in the production of ideology. Fredric Jameson, in his discussion of literary genres, points to this productive role of literature:

ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal “solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions.¹⁴

The literature of the subcontinent offers a glimpse into alternative subaltern ideologies; the elements of what Raymond Williams calls an “emergent culture.”¹⁵ To the process of dry homogeneity unleashed by nationalist ideology literature thus responds by providing expression to, in Fanon’s famous phrase, the “zone of occult instability”¹⁶ that is the real nature of a national culture. The exploration of literary texts, in this dissertation, that offer representations of the nation and its victims is an attempt at questioning the nation’s dominance by foregrounding its discontents.

The literature representing the experiences and ideologies of suppressed groups provide testimony to the dual process of marginalization and appeasement carried out by

¹³ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997) p. 13

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981) p. 79

¹⁵ See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)

¹⁶ Fanon, p. 183

the nation state. The appeasement of the subaltern is a necessary concession that the nation state makes in its attempt to establish the political and cultural hegemony of the elite. The literature of the subaltern groups records not only the dominant group's attempt at hegemony but also its failure. The dissertation begins with a discussion of a novel by Rabindranath Tagore written in the early twentieth century when the national bourgeoisie was coming into its own. My exploration of the text sheds light on the complex ideological negotiations undertaken by the native elite in its attempt at constructing a paradigm of womanhood in the interests of the nation state. The nationalist appropriation of the gender issue at the formative stages of nationalist ideology paves the way for further explorations of the impact of the ideology on other aspects of civic society at a later stage when nationalism gains its dominance. The discussion of the literature, in the following chapters, representing religious minorities and socioeconomically disenfranchised groups highlights their oppositional relationship with the nation state. Finally, I locate a coherent critique of nationalism and alternative visions of social solidarity in contemporary Indian English literature.

The first chapter, "Nationalizing the Woman: Nation and Gender in Tagore's *The Home and the World*," discusses the failure of nationalist ideology to meaningfully engage with the issue of women's emancipation. I focus on the dynamics of the interrelated discourses of gender and nationalism by offering a reading of Tagore's novel, *The Home and the World* (1915). The vast body of criticism of the novel focuses almost exclusively on the differences between two forms of nationalism, represented by the two male characters in the novel, Nikhil and Sandip. I argue that critics have overlooked the centrality of Bimala's character and thereby the intersection of nationalist and gender

politics in the text. The novel, written during the peak of India's Independence movement, succinctly captures the dualistic ideal of womanhood propounded by nationalist ideology. Bimala, the wife of the westernized and liberal Nikhil, receives a modern education and renounces the tradition of "seclusion" and interacts with the outer world. She finds herself deeply inspired by the militant nationalist movement and also infatuated by the nationalist leader, Sandip. Bimala is, however, doomed to remain tragically caught between two worlds. The nationalist elite, which encourages her education and social exposure, refuses to allow Bimala her own path to self-actualization.

I read the novel in the light of recent feminist analyses on the contradiction between the "women's question" and nationalist ideology. Partha Chatterjee, for instance, describes how nationalist projects at once aspire to *modernity* as well as a definable *cultural identity*. Women become the site for the negotiation of these contradictory aspirations. Thus on the one hand the nationalist elite seeks to "emancipate" women, as it is consistent with the larger project of modernity. And yet the new patriarchy of the nation state, in its search for cultural identity, also assigns woman the dubious responsibility of being the bearers of "tradition" and "culture" of the nation. Bimala, in Tagore's novel, represents the "emancipated" woman of the new nation, who is expected to have "the 'spiritual' signs of her femininity ... clearly marked--in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanor, her religiosity" (Chatterjee 130). My reading of *Home and the World* demonstrates the dual process of appropriation and suppression of the gender issue by a nationalist discourse, which held sway during the struggle for Indian Independence, and continues to do so after.

The chapter, "Partitioned Communities: The Nation and Its Religious Minorities," focuses on the connection between religious identity and nation formation. The politics of religious identity and nation building are fundamentally intertwined in the Indian subcontinent. The policy of "divide and rule" followed by the British colonial government was responsible for interlinking religious identity with state policies. The linkage between religion and politics led to the division of India and Pakistan and more pertinently to a persevering civic culture of communal intolerance and sectarian violence in the subcontinent. The literature pertaining to the division of India, commonly referred to as Partition literature, captures the events and experiences of the era in vivid and agonizing detail. The inescapable reality of communal consciousness that challenges the homogenizing logic of the nation-state remains suppressed in the nationalist historiography of the subcontinent. Literature, emerging in the wake of Partition, has become a repository of localized truths evaded and minimized by dominant discourses.

I offer readings of several literary pieces relating to the Partition that bear the imprint of the struggle of a people grappling with the unprecedented carnage unleashed in the name of nation-formation. The creation of Pakistan led to the desperate migration, in the midst of unprecedented civic violence, of Muslims from India and Hindus from Pakistan. The (often forced) abandonment of home and land on both sides of ten million people is the single largest migration caused by any one event in human history. Bhishma Sahani's short story "Pali," by focusing on the sufferings of one divided family, gives voice to the stunned silence of ten million uprooted lives. Kamleshwar's story "How Many Pakistans?" questions the idea that nations can only be conceptualized in terms of large political structures. The story captures the unmitigated agony of severance and

separation at myriad levels brought about by the one event of the partition of the country and thereby broadens the signification of "Pakistan" by including the affective realm. Whether written from the point of view of the perplexed victim or that of the questioning rebel, these literary pieces always provide unmatched glimpses into the fabric of everyday life in that tumultuous period. In its sustained focus on the complexities of communitarian and religious identities, Partition literature gives lie to the unitarian vision of the nation-state.

The next chapter, "'I Don't Know Country': The Nation and Its Dispossessed," explores the nature of socioeconomic and cultural marginalization of large sections of the nation. I begin with a discussion of the ideological conflict between two central figures, Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar. The differences between Gandhi, the arch nationalist and Ambedkar, the most significant political voice of the oppressed castes but frequently branded as an anti-nationalist, is instructive for shedding light on the internal contradictions of Indian nationalism. Gandhian politics, I argue, in appeasing the marginalized sections while accommodating the interests of the economic elite captures the essence of dominant nationalism. Ambedkar, I try to show, on the other hand, is not an anti-nationalist but offered a conception of the nation that threatened the dominant version. Mahashweta Devi, the acclaimed Indian writer and activist, like Ambedkar is staunchly critical of dominant nationalism and offers a vision of the nation that is inclusive of its dispossessed. I offer readings of two of Devi's novellas, *Douloti the Bountiful* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*, that view the marginalized and the dispossessed as constituting a nation within a nation.

Douloti is based on the experiences of the lower castes in the system of “bonded labor.” It is a highly exploitative system in which a low caste laborer after borrowing what is usually a paltry sum of money from a high caste moneylender is practically bonded to the latter for life. In fact in most cases, the whole family of the laborer remains practically enslaved to the moneylender. The novella is a poignant portrayal of gendered class exploitation in one of its most sinister forms. *Pterodactyl* charts the experiences of the aboriginal population of the country. The aboriginal population of over twenty five million is at once exploited and forgotten in the nation’s march towards modernity. The novella portraying the world of the aboriginals through the lens of an urban journalist points to the vast chasm separating the nation’s mainstream from those that it has rendered peripheral. Devi’s works portray how the indigent population of the nation “remain spectators [while] India marches towards the twenty-first century.”¹⁷ Her fiction reinscribes the nation with the subaltern perspective by depicting the nation’s betrayal of the interests and aspirations of its most marginalized sections.

The final chapter, “Speaking With A Forked Tongue: Nationalism in Indian English Literature,” examines the emergence of critiques of nationalism in Indian English Literature (hereafter referred to as IEL) since the early eighties. Since its inception, one hundred and fifty years ago, this body of literature has shared an intimate relationship with nationalist ideology. A literature composed in the language of that nation’s colonizers almost necessarily occupies a terrain of ambiguity and anxiety. Unable to shed the burden of colonial legacy, IEL has tried to compensate for it by espousing the cause of nationhood. The construction of national culture and community has thus been a

¹⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Imaginary Maps: Three stories by Mahashweta Devi* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

persistent motif in IEL. It has been a method for Indian English writers to express their anti-colonial stand and indigenous identity. The critique of nationalism in IEL, emerging only in the nineteen eighties, has paved an entirely new direction for Indian writers writing in English.

I offer readings of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1987) as illustration of this new phenomenon, where the hundred and fifty-year-old knot between IEL and nationalist ideology is finally untied. These texts foreground the many voices in which the *nation* speaks—voices appropriated and marginalized within the discourse of *nationalism*. The identification with and celebration of a dominant version of nationalist ideology in IEL is replaced here by the enactment of a vibrant tension between nation and nationalism. Rushdie's totally unapologetic and triumphantly iconoclastic work challenges entrenched representations of nationalism in politics and literature. Occupying the discursive space opened up by Rushdie, Ghosh renders a realist form to Rushdie's magic, by locating the discontents of nationalism in the consciousness and experiences of his characters. These writers, by carving out a space for IE writing where the critique of nationalist ideology is consistent with one's solidarity with the nation, offer a novel resolution to the dilemmas of a literature tied to colonial history in a neo-colonial world.

My exploration of the literature of the subcontinent aims to highlight subaltern critiques of dominant nationalism as also alternative ideologies of collectivity and solidarity. The Indian bourgeoisie wrested power from British colonialists but only to claim its own dominance. It is necessary for the bourgeois elite, as indeed it is for all

ruling classes, to present its own interests in universal terms because as Karl Marx points out:

... each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to present its own interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones.¹⁸

The native ruling class' need for universality in our particular case is served by nationalist ideology. This project aims to show not just the false claim of universality ingrained in nationalist ideology but, more significantly, the bourgeoisie's limited success with that claim

¹⁸ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels , *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975-1994) 5:60

CHAPTER 2
NATIONALIZING THE WOMAN: NATION AND GENDER IN TAGORE'S *THE HOME AND THE WORLD*

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister and an architect of modern India, acknowledged his intellectual debt above all to two people, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Ashish Nandy correctly observes that Nehru should have added that while he owed his political growth to Gandhi, Tagore was his intellectual guru.¹ Indeed, Tagore -- primarily through his writings, but also through his direct participation in the intellectual and political life of the nascent nation -- had a formative influence on modern Indian history. This chapter discusses the interrelated discourses of gender and nation in Tagore's thought through a reading of his novel, *The Home and the World* (1915).² Tagore was a self-professed internationalist and *The Home and the World* was meant by the author to be an articulation of his internationalist commitment. Through my reading of the novel, I make a two-fold argument: first, that there is an underlying commonality between Tagore's internationalism and the dominant nationalist ideology; and second, that his internationalist views are questionable for their gender politics in the same way as is nationalist ideology. It is my contention that Tagore's views on the "women's question," as reflected in this novel, are of the same species as those of the dominant nationalist discourse in India--a discourse which held sway during the struggle for Independence, and continues to do so after.

¹ Ashish Nandy, "Illegitimacy of Nationalism" in *Return From Exile* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.4

² Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*, (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

This project argues that nationalist ideology attempts to rob the citizens of a nation of their multifarious identities. In the following chapters I show how dominant nationalism employs the dual process of appeasement and marginalization towards various subaltern groups in the interests of "nation building" in the postcolonial subcontinent. The present chapter dwelling on the colonial period focuses on the complex ideological negotiations undertaken by the nationalist bourgeoisie in its attempt to create a paradigm of ideal womanhood. The process of appeasement and marginalization towards women was successfully employed with the rhetoric of emancipation and the actuality of subjection to "national interests." This chapter thus shows how nationalist ideology built its initial ideological groundwork for future constructions of the edifice of dominance.

Nations and (Inter)nationalism

Martha Nussbaum in her controversial piece, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,"³ foregrounds the limits of nationalist ideology and makes an impressive case for an internationalist cosmopolitanism. She offers a reading of *Home and the World* and asserts that the text shows us the pitfalls of the narrow ideal of patriotism and presents the possibility of a more inclusive and morally just order of internationalism. Nussbaum questions nationalism for what she views to be its fundamental affinity with ethnocentrism. Nationalism, in her view, runs the danger of prioritizing local allegiances or "morally irrelevant characteristic[s]"⁴ over and above that which is universal and morally good. Nationalist ideology, she contends, "substitutes a colorful idol for the

³ Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism" in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, ed., Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

⁴ Ibid., p.5.

substantive universal values of justice and right".⁵ She advocates the alternative ideal of internationalist cosmopolitanism and stresses that it does not require abandoning local identities. While local allegiances "can be a source of great richness,"⁶ the truly cosmopolitan ideal requires the recognition of the "interlocking commonality" of the world community.

Nussbaum's piece makes an interesting comparison with Jameson's essay on third world literature.⁷ Unlike Nussbaum, Jameson holds that nationalist ideology has an integral role to play in the context of the third world. The central difference between them notwithstanding, the two essays share a lot of common ground. The polemical energy in both Jameson and Nussbaum's pieces emanates from a deeply critical stance towards US cultural and political parochialism. Both propound the fundamental necessity for the study and appreciation of cultures and societies other than one's own. And they both offer readings of third world literary texts to bolster their arguments. The similarity between the two positions, however, ceases here.

While nationalist ideology, Jameson contends, has proved to be questionable in the first world, it retains its value in the third world. The rejection of nationalism in the third world, Jameson asserts, opens up the possibility of the negation and/or representational appropriation of that part of the world by North American postmodernist economy and culture. Nussbaum, however, does not recommend such distinctions for different parts of

⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷ Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital," Social Text Theory/Culture/Ideology Fall (1986): 65-88.

the world. It is the "*universal* moral norms"⁸ of justice and reason, according to her, that deserves higher allegiance than does the nation. If nationalism is questionable in the US, it is also problematic in the rest of the world. The contemporary world will be well served, she holds, by the old cosmopolitan ideal of "allegiance to a worldwide community of human beings."⁹ The two writers mobilize literary texts in support of their positions. Jameson offers readings of texts by the Chinese writer Lu Xun and the Senegalese writer Ousmane Sembene to make his central claim that "all third world texts are necessarily... *national allegories*."¹⁰ (emphasis in original). Nussbaum makes her point by providing a reading of Tagore's novel that she holds is a "story of education for world citizenship."¹¹

Nussbaum and Jameson's common aspiration to move beyond cultural parochialism and forge a theoretical and practical approach for understanding and appreciating other societies is laudable. This paper takes issue not with their professed aims but with the different theoretical approaches that they propose--nationalism and internationalism--as ways of addressing their goals.¹² Ideologies of nationalism and internationalism, I argue,

⁸ Nussbaum, p. 8.

⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁰ Jameson, p. 69.

¹¹ Nussbaum, p. 15.

¹² I recognize that unlike in Nussbaum the primary concern in Jameson's essay is not to engage with nationalist ideology but to offer a different approach for appreciating third world literature. My quarrel is not with the idea of reading third world literature (or any literature) as *national allegory*. (Indeed in a crucial sense this dissertation does precisely that.) However, in the introductory paragraph of his essay, Jameson does propound the significance of *nationalism* in the third world and rhetorically asks "whether it is all that bad in the end"--a view that is reiterated in the essay. I take issue not with Jameson's idea of *national allegory*--which opens up the possibility for alternative and richer visions of the nation--but his (perhaps unwitting) defense of nationalist ideology--which is inseparable from exploitative power structures in *all* parts of the world. I would like to thank Phillip Wegner for prodding me on to make this distinction.

can be equally adversarial to the interests of developing countries. My point of entry into Nussbaum's essay is her reading of Tagore's novel that is a central source of her argument. In providing an alternative reading of the text, I seek to show the unwitting *continuity* between Jameson and Nussbaum's positions and thereby a common set of issues that they both leave unaddressed.

Jameson's espousal of third world nationalism stems from an urgent need to safeguard the newfound sense of identity of the erstwhile-colonized peoples. In his attempt to protect the "difference" of the third world, however, Jameson ends up evading the radical differences *within* the third world. There is an uneasy silence in his essay on issues of discrimination and inequality in the third world. He refuses to engage with the question of whether and how nationalism addresses the pressing issues of gender, class and caste discriminations in third world countries. *It is significant that while Nussbaum critiques nationalism, the charges against Jameson's advocacy of nationalism are not reflected in her critique.* Nussbaum questions nationalism primarily for its affinity with ethnocentrism. In her advocacy of internationalism, however, Nussbaum is as uninterested in the process by which nationalist ideology suppresses numerous social contradictions, as is Jameson. In refusing to address this central problematic of nationalist ideology, Nussbaum does not really manage to circumvent it. In an interesting twist, her definition of internationalist cosmopolitanism invites some of the same charges, as does Jameson's espousal of nationalism.

The bourgeois elite that makes ideological use of nationalism to suppress social contradictions and consolidate its own interests is quite capable of making the same use of internationalist cosmopolitanism. In neglecting this issue, Nussbaum unwittingly ends

up showing how a vision of internationalism is consistent, for instance, with unjustifiable gender politics. The contradiction between internationalism and the issue of gender equity emerges in Nussbaum's reading of *Home and the World*. This is especially significant in light of the fact that the contradiction between the "women's question" and nationalist ideology has been a subject of sustained theoretical discussions. It has been shown that the nationalist elite at once appropriates and suppresses issues of women's rights and demands.¹³ My reading of Tagore's novel demonstrates this dual process of appropriation and suppression of the gender issue by a nationalist elite--only this time in the name of internationalist cosmopolitanism.

The World in The Home and the World

This paper makes a two-fold argument: one, there is an underlying commonality between Tagore's internationalism and the dominant nationalist ideology; two, his internationalist views are questionable for their gender politics in the same way as is nationalist discourse. First, I will try to show how Tagore's internationalism, in spite of its vociferous critique of nationalism, shares some basic ideological grounds with the target of its critique. In a series of lectures delivered in Japan and the US, the author tried to convince the world that "nationalism is a great menace."¹⁴ The solution to India's manifold problems, Tagore asserts, does not lie in forming itself into a nation. For it is the very logic of the nation, in the form of British imperialism, that is the *cause* of India's misery. The colonial enterprise, in this view, derives from Western nationalism. Nations

¹³ See M. Molyneux, "Family Reforms in Socialist States: The Hidden Agenda," *Feminist Review*, 21, Winter (1985) : 47-64; C. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs*, 7.3 (1989) : 515-44; V. Burstyn, "Masculine Dominance and the State," *Socialist Register*, (1983) : 45-89; M. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, (London: Zed Press, 1986); N. Yuval-Davis and F. Anthias, *Woman-Nation-State* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

¹⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, (Delhi: Rupa & Co.: 1992) p. 87.

represent merely political power not human ideals and when "with the help of science and the perfecting of organization this power begins to grow and bring in harvests of wealth, then it crosses its boundaries with amazing rapidity".¹⁵ The cold rationality of nationalism is questioned not only because it engenders imperialism but also because it vitally compromises the very people it mechanically unites. Tagore preempts the post-enlightenment critique of instrumental rationality in his critique of nationalism:

In the West the national machinery of commerce and politics turns out neatly compressed bales of humanity which have their use and high market value; but they are bound in iron hoops, labelled and separated off with scientific care and precision. Obviously God made man to be human, but this modern product has such marvellous square-cut finish, savouring of gigantic manufacture, that the Creator will find it difficult to recognize it as a thing of spirit and a creature made in his own divine image.¹⁶

Thus Tagore unequivocally rejects the mechanized and divisive discourse of nation and nationalism and asserts that there is "only one history - the history of man."¹⁷ Now, it is extremely crucial to appreciate the point that even as Tagore is contemptuous of the "self-idolatry of nation-worship," he also rejects the "colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism."¹⁸ The "history of man" that he celebrates is constitutive of the distinctive but complementary histories of the East and the West. It is through this orientalist belief in the fundamental difference between civilizations that nationalism makes a back-door entry into his thought. Thus while he chastises Britain for believing that the East and West shall never meet, his position is different from that of imperial Britain's only in that he believes that the two civilizations cannot not be distinct and apart

¹⁵ Ibid., p.51.

¹⁶ Ibid., 49.

¹⁷ Ibid., 78

¹⁸ Ibid., 48

but need to interact and learn from one another. To that end Tagore is prepared to accept the presence of the British in India as "providential" for "someone must show the East to the West, and convince the West that the East has her contribution to make to the history of civilization."¹⁹

Tagore, for his part, acknowledges some of the significant contributions that the West can make to the rest of the world. The East needs to learn from the West, for instance, the value of public good above those of the family and the clan, of the rule of law and, very significantly, the pursuit of liberty. That said, the thrust of Tagore's lectures is on the distinct identity of the East, constituted of the "wisdom" that it has "stored for centuries," its treasure house of spiritual wealth, that the West would ignore at its own peril. And to the people of his own country, his advice is that it would be "no good to compete with Western civilization in its own field." India "cannot borrow other people's history" but has to follow its own destiny. Tagore holds up Japan as an exemplary case of an Eastern civilization that has embraced the material advancements of the West and has yet remained firmly rooted in its own traditions. It is not hard to see that the "internationalism" that Nussbaum celebrates in Tagore, while rejecting the false divisiveness engendered by nations, deeply affirms a fundamental divide in civilizations.

In *Home and the World*, the author attempts a fictional representation of his views on nationalism and its pitfalls. But first, a summary of the novel is in order. The setting of the novel is Bengal in the early part of the century. Bimala is married to the aristocratic landlord, Nikhil for nine years. She follows the tradition of 'seclusion' whereby women remain largely restricted to the inner quarters of the household. Nikhil, western educated

¹⁹ Ibid., 85

and liberal, however, has different plans for his wife. He provides modern education to her by employing an English governess. Further, he insists that she should come out of the inner quarters and meet and communicate with people. Overcoming her initial reluctance, Bimala breaks the family tradition and meets with Sandip, Nikhil's long time friend and a revolutionary freedom fighter. She soon finds herself strongly attracted to the charismatic and virile Sandip, with his revolutionary speeches, his passionate outlook, and his fervent adulation of her.

Bimala's attraction towards Sandip plays out in the broader context of the emerging differences between Nikhil and Sandip. Nikhil stands firmly opposed to what he views to be Sandip's idealized and coercive brand of nationalism. Sandip, according to this view, idealizes an abstract notion of the nation and believes that a politics of coercion is justified in the nationalistic cause. Nikhil holds that it is precisely because Sandip idealizes an abstract idea of the nation, he can justify coercing the people who constitute the nation. In the face of growing opposition from Sandip and his followers, Nikhil remains loyal to his liberal ideal of freedom of choice for the individual. In refusing to curb the freedom of his wife, even after he realizes the depth of her infatuation for Sandip, Nikhil passes the ultimate test posed by his own beliefs. Bimala, on her own, discovers the falsehood ingrained in Sandip's charismatic personality and learns to appreciate her husband's superior moral character. The destruction of the "home" brought about by Bimala's emancipation, however, ends the novel on a tragic note.

The ideological struggle between Nikhil and Sandip highlights the author's own position on the desirability of nationalism. In his lectures, consistent with the rhetoric of "Eastern destiny," Tagore claims that the task for India lies in recognizing and reforming

its social and spiritual life of its people and not in the pursuit of the political. The overemphasis of the political, according to the author, is the cause of the moral and spiritual impoverishment of the West. The rejection of the political for the spiritual, in the context of colonial India, translates into a questioning of the methods and aims of that faction of anti-colonial struggle, whose sole aim, in Tagore's view, is political independence:

[T]he extremists, who advocated independence of action ... Their ideals were based on western history. They had no sympathies with the special problems of India. They did not recognize the patent fact that there were causes in our social organization which made the Indian incapable of coping with the alien... [P]olitical freedom does not give us freedom when our mind is not free.... We must never forget in the present day that those people who have got their political freedom are not necessarily free; they are merely powerful. The passions which are unbridled in them are creating huge organizations of slavery in the disguise of freedom.... Those of us in India who have come under the delusion that mere political freedom will make us free have accepted their lessons from the West as the gospel truth and lost their faith in humanity.²⁰

Sandip, in *Home and the World*, represents the "extremist" political leader, not in tune with the traditions and the culture of the country, and nurturing the sole aim of independence from the British. While the liberal and aristocratic Nikhil, the spokesperson of the author, believes in taking responsibility for the social and spiritual decline of the people of his country. E. P. Thompson, praising the separation of the political/economic from the social/spiritual, observes that "Tagore, more than any other thinker of his time, had a clear conception of civil society, as something distinct from and of stronger and more personal texture than political or economic structures."²¹ The appreciation of civil society, it needs to be said, however, (and I believe Thompson would agree), remains

²⁰ Ibid., p. 88-94.

²¹ E. P. Thompson, Introduction, Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 14.

hopelessly inadequate if it is not enriched by a conception of the *relationship* between civil society and political and economic structures. Tagore refuses to address how his desired social and cultural reformation in civil society could be brought about in the face of political slavery and economic drainage. Unburdened by the problematic of unequal power relations, he maintains that the moral superiority of the East will ultimately prevail. In his unshakable faith in the uniqueness of spiritual India, the *nation* looms large in Tagore's vision of *internationalism*.

The Home in The Home and the World

The underlying connection between Tagore's problematic ideology of internationalism and his stance on gender issues emerges in reading *Home and the World* against the intentions of the author. Nussbaum's reading of the novel can be located within a larger critical body that refuses to interpret the work outside its implicit authorial intention. In her reading, she chooses to focus solely on the ideological differences between Nikhil and Sandip. Bimala's struggles with possibilities for freedom and self-actualization do not figure in this interpretation. It may be argued that the issue of women's emancipation lies outside the theoretical parameters of Nussbaum's essay in which she questions the desirability of the patriotic ideal. However, the limited reading of the novel that she does offer, provides enough clues to her views on Bimala's character and its significance in the novel.

Nussbaum unequivocally avows Nikhil's (and Tagore's) ideological stance as the one that upholds the "substantive universal values of justice and right".²² If she holds Nikhil's position on "justice and right" to be the normative one, Nussbaum must believe

²² Nussbaum, p. 5.

his stance on women's emancipation to be unproblematic, if not desirable. In this reading, the onus of the novel's tragic ending and of Bimala's failed emancipation falls squarely on Bimala herself: "the entire tragic story is told by the widowed Bimala, who understands, if too late, that Nikhil's morality was vastly superior to Sandip's...that what looked like lack of passion in Nikhil contained a truly loving perception of her as a person".²³ The novel then becomes a classic morality tale and Bimala the tragic but reformed beneficiary of its message. It may be pointed out that even Tagore, whose intentions Nussbaum claims to represent, shied away from the heavy moralism implicit in Nussbaum's reading. Bimala is *not* widowed at the end of the novel as Nussbaum suggests. Here she could be following the film adaptation of the novel directed by Satyajit Ray. The concluding scene in the novel, where the waiting Bimala receives the news of Nikhil's severe head wound, allows for a more open interpretation than the one implied by Nussbaum (or Ray).

The interpretation of the novel in terms of the unequivocal espousal of Nikhil/Tagore's position and the elision of the significance of Bimala's character is by no means unique to Nussbaum. Indeed the novel has largely been read as a struggle between the two male characters and Bimala assigned a symbolic status. She represents the "beauty, vitality and glory of Bengal," in one reading, and Nikhil and Sandip's battle for her symbolizes "a battle for the future of Bengal, as they represent two opposing visions." While Sandip's vision represents the irrelevance of moral standards, Nikhil is the "enlightened humanist who asserts ... truth ...[and] freedom".²⁴

²³ Ibid., p. 15-16.

²⁴ David W. Atkinson, "Tagore's *The Home and the World*: A Call for a New World Order," *The International Fiction Review*, 20.2 (1993) p. 96.

In his more nuanced reading of the novel, Ashis Nandy similarly asserts that "Bimala, symbolizing Bengal ... is shown confronting two forms of patriotism. Nikhil ... is [initially] outshone by Sandip's flamboyance till a tragic ... sequence ... reveals his true heroism to Bimala".²⁵ As I suggest earlier, reading the novel in terms of Nikhil's "enlightened humanism" and Bimala's mere symbolic worth is to remain trapped within the implicit authorial intention of the novel. Such readings fail to interrogate both the avowed internationalism and the gender politics of the author. Some recent critiques of the novel have provided a much-needed feminist analysis of the text.²⁶ They have highlighted the emergence of the "new patriarchy" as signaled in Nikhil/Tagore's gender politics. Even though these interpretations are valuable for locating the gender dynamics in the text to the larger nationalist context, they remain limited in one crucial way. They fail to make the *connection* between Tagore's avowed internationalism and his problematic stance on the women's question. I will now attempt to establish the relation between the two strands (i.e. internationalism and gender) of the author's thought by, first, discussing the political background to the novel, and then relating the political context to the author's gender politics.

The Political Context

It is important to briefly visit the context of Tagore's novel to appreciate the political reality that generated the author's internationalist thought. The discourse of nationalism that is the subject of the novel emerged after a particular political move by

²⁵ Nandy, p. 12-15.

²⁶ See Sangeeta Ray, "Woman as Nation and a Nation of Women: Tagore's *The Home and the World* and Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*" in *En-Gendering India*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000); Indrani Mitra, "I Will Make Bimala One With My Country: Gender and Nationalism in Tagore's *The Home and the World*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.2 (1995) : 243-264.

the British. In 1905, Bengal, a giant presidency within the Indian union, was partitioned into two units, East and West Bengal. The justification for the act was administrative convenience. The real reason for the partition was, however, obvious to all concerned--it was another ploy consistent with the old British strategy of "Divide and Rule." The division was carried out on religious lines, East Bengal was largely inhabited by Muslims and West Bengal dominated by Hindus. By thus attempting to divide the population, the potential threat posed by a unified Bengal was sought to be averted. The Home Secretary H. H. Risley, in his notes to fellow administrators, left no ground for ambiguity as to the motive of the government on the planned partition of the province:

Bengal united is a power; Bengal divided will pull in several different ways. That is perfectly true and one of the merits of the scheme.... [I]n this scheme ... one of our main objects is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule.²⁷

The move was unanimously condemned through out the country and there was a felt need for a strong agitation against it. The Indian National Congress, the central nationalist organization, initially attempted to oppose the partition through moderate means like appeals and petitions to the governments. The complete failure of such methods in addressing the situation lead to the search for new forms of agitation. The boycott of British goods as also of British educational and other institutions became the central strategy of the second phase of this movement that came to be known as *swadeshi* (literally "own countryism"). It is the era of *swadeshi* that is the political site of *Home and the World*.²⁸

²⁷ Qtd. in Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*, (Madras: Macmillan, 1983) p.107.

²⁸ For critical historical accounts of the *swadeshi* movement, see Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*; Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement*; J.N. Vapeyi, *The Extremist Movement in India*, (Allahabad: Chugh Publications, 1974); David Laushey, *Bengal terrorism and the Marxist left: Aspects of Regional Nationalism in India, 1905-1942*, (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1975).

Tagore was initially not only an ardent supporter of but also an active participant in the *swadeshi* movement. However, within a year or so, by around 1908, disillusioned by the nature of the movement, he retreated from the sphere of active politics. His sudden withdrawal generated a lot of questions and criticisms. Tagore attempted to answer his critics first, in a series of articles and after a few years, through his novel *Home and the World*. His central critique of the *swadeshi* movement is targeted against what he perceived to be its politics of fear and coercion. The militant leadership of the movement, according to the author, was out of touch with the everyday needs and interests of the masses. The leadership thus remained oblivious to the fact that it is the poorer sections of the population that suffered the most from the movement that forced them to boycott all trade in foreign goods. The *swadeshi* leadership forced its ideology of liberation, according to the author, without taking responsibility for the costs incurred by the people. The tyranny of the British rule, Tagore holds, cannot be fought by replacing it with the tyranny of the natives. "To tyrannize for the country," Nikhil declares in the novel, "is to tyrannize over the country."

Ranajit Guha, in his perceptive critique of the Indian national movement, is appreciative of Tagore's stance on the *swadeshi* movement.²⁹ Guha's own critique exposes the elitist character of the anti-colonial movement and the failure of the nationalist leadership to create its hegemony over its own mass base. The commonality between the Indian ruling class and its British counterpart, in Guha's memorable phrase, is "dominance without hegemony." Tagore's opposition to *swadeshi*, in Guha's reading, represents a self-conscious moment in the nationalist struggle in which it was realized

²⁹ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) p. 108-110.

that if "patriotism were allowed to base itself on fear and coercion rather than persuasion, that would be altogether self-defeating for the nationalist cause".³⁰ Indeed Tagore's critique of nationalism in *Home and the World* has many admirers.³¹ While Nussbaum applauds the writer's internationalist sympathies, Guha respects his capacity to perceive the drawbacks of the nationalist movement, Ashis Nandy celebrates Tagore's rejection of the "post-medieval western concept of nationalism".³²

Lukacs, Gandhi and Tagore

Not every critic of *Home and the World*, however, has found reasons to celebrate the novel. In a devastating review of the work, titled "Tagore's Gandhi Novel," Georg Lukacs finds not a single redeemable feature in what he calls a "propagandistic, demagogically one-sided... novel [that is] completely worthless from the artistic angle."³³ Lukacs' main quarrel with the author, I suspect, is not regarding what he considers to be Tagore's lack of artistic or imaginative capacities. His thoroughly dismissive criticism of the novel seems to be based on what he perceives to be Tagore's questionable political sympathies. Lukacs finds no excuse for Tagore's criticism of a national movement aimed at resisting enslavement and oppression. Tagore's philosophy of internationalism for Lukacs is merely an attempt to "conceal his impotent hatred of the Indian freedom fighters in a 'profound' philosophy of the 'universally human'."³⁴ It is through the

³⁰ Ibid., p. 110.

³¹ For yet another appreciative reading of Tagore's political stance in the novel, see Anita Desai, Introduction, *The Home and the World*.

³² Nandy, p. 2.

³³ Georg Lukacs, "Tagore's Gandhi Novel Review of Rabindranath Tagore: *The Home and the World*," in *Reviews and Articles*, Trans. Peter Palmer, (London: Merlin Press, 1983) p. 10.

³⁴ Ibid., 9

character of Sandip, who Lukacs believes to be a "contemptible caricature of Gandhi,"³⁵ that Tagore launches his attack on the anti-colonial movement and thus proves to be Britain's "intellectual agent in the struggle against the Indian freedom movement."³⁶

Even though there is indeed something to be said about Tagore's politics and idealism, Lukacs' critique is irremediably flawed by his inadequate knowledge of Indian politics.³⁷ Tagore, for all his reservations about the Indian national movement in particular, and perhaps all politics in general, was no sympathizer of the empire. He remained a staunch and vocal critic of British colonialism throughout his life. Even as Tagore alienated many nationalists with his views, he never endeared himself to the British government. Recent research shows that the author, who had renounced his knighthood as a sign of solidarity with his country, was "under surveillance of the British Indian police, his mail was censored, and he was regarded as a 'constant opponent of the government.'"³⁸ Thus Lukacs' view of Tagore as an anti-nationalist betrays a superficial acquaintance with the nationalist movement. This leads Lukacs into making an even graver error regarding the central figure of the nationalist movement and Tagore's relationship with him.

Lukacs makes a simplistic equation between the nationalist movement and Gandhi and holds that Tagore's critique of the movement was tantamount to his critique of

³⁵ Ibid., 10

³⁶ Ibid., 9

³⁷ For a caustic take on Lukacs' lack of knowledge of Indian literature, see Ashis Nandy, p. 15-19. Another piece that similarly questions Lukacs' "eurocentric" judgment on Tagore's literary merits is Kalyan K. Chatterjee, "Lukacs on Tagore: Ideology and Literary Criticism," *Indian Literature*, 31.3 (1988): 153-60.

³⁸ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed., *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-1941*, (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997) p. 29

Gandhi. This is quite simply not the case. At the time that the novel was written Gandhi was not a central figure in the movement, Tagore had met Gandhi only once at the time and had come away very impressed with the meeting. But more significantly, the politics of *Home and the World*, in its repudiation of violence and its espousal of universal humanism, comes very close to Gandhian politics. It is no coincidence that Gandhi and Tagore, despite their public differences on many issues, shared a life-long companionship based on deep mutual respect and admiration. What Lukacs misses is that *Tagore's internationalist politics with all its attendant problems is very much compatible with mainstream Indian nationalist ideology*. It is not surprising that Gandhi, the main ideologue of the nationalist movement, shared Tagore's suspicion of "exclusive nationalism" and his faith in "universal brotherhood." And once again in Gandhi, as in Tagore, (arguably more so,) universalism coexists with the belief in cultural essentialism. Tagore's rhetoric of "Eastern destiny" finds a practical voice in myriad aspects of Gandhian politics.

Nation and Gender

Gandhi and Tagore, two stalwarts of modern India, share the same intellectual perspective on the issue of gender. The East/West dichotomy in Tagore's political thought translates into the masculine/feminine binary in his views on women and their social role:

The ideal of stability is deeply cherished in woman's nature... All her forces instinctively work to bring things to some shape of fullness, - for that is the law of life... [While] the masculine creations of intellectual civilization are towers of Babel, they dare to defy their foundations and therefore topple down over and over again.³⁹

³⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America*, (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1917) p. 171.

The "feminine principle," in this view, is accorded a higher and a more necessary function in the civilizational task than the masculine one. The glorification of women, however, when based on an essentialist notion of the "feminine," always comes with a price. And the price is embedded in the author's description of the "passive qualities of chastity, modesty, devotion and the power of self-sacrifice" with which a woman is endowed "in a greater measure than man is."⁴⁰ Tagore forgets to mention that these *passive* qualities are *actively and institutionally* demanded of women in a patriarchal society.

One such institution that demands all the aforesaid "qualities" in women is that of widowhood. And Gandhi, sharing the same philosophical perspective on gender as Tagore, justifies this institution that is one of the most egregious aspects of Indian patriarchy: "The ideal of widowhood is one of the glories of the Hindu religion."⁴¹ The support of patriarchal institutions in Gandhi flows from an identical essentialist premise on gender as that of Tagore's: "Nature has created sexes as complements of each other. Their functions are defined as their forms."⁴² Once again, like Tagore, Gandhi also passionately believed and worked towards the social upliftment of women--a project perfectly consistent within patriarchy.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁴¹ Pushpa Joshi, Comp., *Gandhi on Women: Compilation of Mahatma Gandhi's Writings and Speeches on Women*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1988) p. 45.

⁴² Ibid., 313.

⁴³ For marxist feminist critiques of Gandhi's position on gender see, Sujata Patel, "Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 February (1988) : 377-387; Madhu Kishwar, "Gandhi on Women," Pt. 1, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5 October (1985) : 1691-1702; Pt. 2, 12 October (1985) : 1753-1758.

I focus on the similarity between Tagore and Gandhi's world-view to demonstrate that Tagore's "internationalism" and his gender politics, as evident in *Home and the World*, are both very much in tune with the mainstream nationalist culture. It is significant that critical appreciation of Tagore's stance on nationalism in the novel is always accompanied by either a silence on the writer's position on gender (Guha, Nussbaum) or by an unqualified approval of his position on the issue (Nandy). Sumit Sarkar's recent essay on the novel⁴⁴ provides an illuminating instance of the same phenomenon. Sarkar acknowledges that his earlier commentary on the novel did in no way address the gender issue. But then he proceeds to provide a reading that once again not only marginalizes the issue of Bimala's emancipation but also justifies Tagore's position that Bimala is not "worthy of true independence."⁴⁵ For Sarkar, the novel basically remains valuable for its portrayal of the struggle between alternative conceptions of masculinity.

None of this is perhaps so surprising when read in the light of Partha Chatterjee's insightful observations on the interlocking discourses of nation and gender in Indian politics at the turn of the century.⁴⁶ Chatterjee sets out to answer the question as to why the women's issue, that was so central in mid-nineteenth century Bengal, seemed to have disappeared from the public arena by the dawn of the new century. Through his analysis, Chatterjee shows that it is not the case that the women's question ceases to be an issue during the more advanced stage of nationalist politics. The women's question only ceases

⁴⁴ Sumit Sarkar, "Nationalism and Stri-Swadhinata," in his collection *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindurva, History* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002)

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148

⁴⁶ Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, eds., Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

to be an issue *in its own right* and is now appropriated within the larger discourse of nationalism.

Tagore's *The Home and the World* is a classic instance of the ideology of the new patriarchy that successfully nationalized the women's question. Interestingly, critics of *Home and the World* who either circumvent the gender issue or applaud the stance on the interwoven discourses of nationalism and gender in the text, *reflect* rather than *critique* the phenomenon that Chatterjee describes.

Chatterjee analyses the contrary pulls of tradition and modernity in the nationalist struggle and its impact on gender politics in the Indian context.⁴⁷ His analysis draws on a large body of feminist criticism about the ambivalent role of the project of nation formation on women's issues. Kumari Jayawardena, for instance, holds that anti-colonialist and nationalist struggles with their democratic aspirations are beneficial to women's movements. The transformation of social institutions and customs brought about by postcolonial nation-states, according to this view, facilitates women's entry into the public sphere. Other theorists like Yuval-Davis and Anthias have, however, pointed out the superficial nature of state intervention in addressing women's issues. According to them, the modern state replaces traditional male dominance with its own form of patriarchy. Women in the new regime become the bearers of culture and tradition and symbolize the collective identity of nationalities. The state with its legal, administrative and ideological apparatuses enforces this new form of patriarchy.

⁴⁷ For some other critical accounts on the gender question in nineteenth century India, see Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Responses of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849-1905*, (Rajshahi: Rajshahi University Press, 1983); Manisha Roy, *Bengali Women*, (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1992); Sumit Sarkar, "The Women's Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal," in *Women and Culture*, eds., Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (Bombay: SNDT Women's University, 1986).

Deniz Kandiyoti points to the commonality that lies behind the differences between various feminist theorists.⁴⁸ Feminists, according to Kandiyoti, share the common belief that the "integration of women into modern 'nationhood' ... somehow follows a *different* trajectory from that of men".⁴⁹ The source of this difference, Kandiyoti observes, can be traced to the "Janus-faced" quality of nationalist discourse that "presents itself both as a modern project and melts and transforms traditional attachments in favor of new identities and as a reaffirmation of authentic cultural values culled from the depths of a presumed communal past."⁵⁰ Chatterjee describes precisely this nationalist project that at once aspires to modernity as well as a definable cultural identity. Women become the site for the negotiation of these contradictory aspirations. Thus on the one hand the nationalist elite seeks to "emancipate" women, as it is consistent with the larger project of modernity. And yet the new patriarchy of the nation state, in its search for cultural identity, also makes woman the bearer of tradition. Thus the "emancipated" woman of the new nation had "the "spiritual" signs of her femininity ... clearly marked--in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanor, her religiosity".⁵¹

Woman, in early twentieth century India, become the site for negotiating the contrary pulls of bipolar forces like tradition and modernity and westernization and self-reliance. Recognizing the extensive and intricate ideological nature of the task, one social commentator of the time declares that women must be "refined, reorganized, recast,

⁴⁸ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Identity and its Discontents: Woman and the Nation," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 20.3 (1991) : 429-443.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 430.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

⁵¹ Chatterjee, p. 130.

regenerated."⁵² It is this attempt at the production of the brand new nationalized woman by the native elite that is at the heart of Tagore's novel. Nikhil, the liberal landlord, is critical of the tradition of seclusion of women. If women lack perspective and depth, he believes, it is not they themselves that are responsible. Women's minds, he declares, are "like the feet of Chinese women... the pressure of society [has] cramped them into pettiness and crookedness ... They are like pawns of the fate which gambles with them. What responsibility have they of their own?"⁵³ Putting his beliefs into practice, he challenges his age-old household tradition of secluding women and facilitates his wife's entry into the social sphere. It is this liberalism that Nussbaum finds worth celebrating in the text. She remains oblivious to the flip side of the modernist rhetoric of nationalism.

Recall that Nussbaum praises the text not for its nationalism but for what she views to be its avowal of internationalism. There is of course enough evidence in the text to support her position. Nikhil, for instance, derides patriotic zealotry in the novel as a form of self-hypnosis and declares that to ascribe to such patriotic "infatuation a higher place than Truth is a sign of inherent slavishness".⁵⁴ Patriotism, Nikhil argues, is less a means to reaching out to fellow human beings and more of a jingoistic stimulant. "Those who cannot love men just because they are men," Nikhil asserts, "they love excitement more than their country".⁵⁵ As a corollary to his faith in humanism, Nikhil also upholds what he believes to be a liberal modernist position on the women's issue. Thus from the

⁵² See Koylaschunder Bose, "On the Education of Hindu Females" in *Nineteenth century Studies*, ed. Alok Ray (Calcutta: Bibliographical Research Centre, 1975) p. 214.

⁵³ *Home and the World*, p. 22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

authorial perspective, the text is meant to be an expostulation of universal humanism and female emancipation. And Nussbaum upholds precisely this authorial intention of the text to espouse truth, the love of fellow men and a liberal stance on the women's question *without examining the political content of these ideological principles.*

The avowal of universal humanism, I contend, is merely the ideological integument for a nationalist agenda with its problematic stance on women's rights. This is naturally not to say that Tagore himself was aware of the relationship between his internationalist ideology and the nationalist project. But critics need to look beyond the author's own perspective and expose the connection between avowed ideology and actual politics. Appreciative critics of the text celebrate the liberal rhetoric in the text, as for instance, in Nikhil's pronouncement:

I longed to find Bimala blossoming fully in all her truth and power. But the thing I forgot to calculate was, that one must give up all claims on conventional rights, if one would find a person freely revealed in truth.⁵⁶

The prioritizing of women's self-actualization and freedom over conventional roles is of course a profound liberal value. The question then is whether the "claims on conventional rights" are indeed given up by Nikhil or are those rights asserted all over again, only in a somewhat modified fashion. While Nikhil would indeed like to believe that he has set his wife free, in actuality she is never really free to determine the nature and direction of her self-realization. And while he would allegedly like to see Bimala blossom in *her* "truth and power," he also has very definitive views on the "real nature" and the "true role" of women. Bimala in her "freedom" is thus strongly pressured to

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

conform to a certain ideal of femininity that as I argue is also the prescribed ideal for the nationalized woman.

Nikhil's expectations from his wife need to be located in the context of the raging debates on the women's question in Bengal in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indeed this is the setting for the emergence of the "new woman" who has to walk the tight rope of tradition and modernity and thereby symbolize the identity of the new nation. How exactly is this complex negotiation between tradition and modernity enacted to generate the nationalized woman? The new woman, it needs to be remarked at the outset, is as much a class as a gendered construction. The nationalist elite constructed this woman within the parameters of its own class. The explicit distinguishing mark of the modern, nationalized woman is that she receives an education unlike the working class countrywoman. This is the greatest concession to modernity made by the nationalist elite. But tradition makes a backdoor entry through the *nature and content* of her education. A social commentator of the time observes that "females are not required to be educated by the standard which is adapted to men... [because] woman has but one resource - Home."⁵⁷ Based on a similar perception of the biological and social role of women, a late nineteenth century Bengali magazine prescribes the differential character of female education:

A woman's nature is generally emotional while a man's is rational. Only that therefore can be termed authentic female education which primarily aims at improving the heart of a woman, and only secondarily improving her mind... The main aim of real female education is to train, improve and nourish the gentle and noble qualities of her heart... Under such a system attempts should be made through means of religious education, moral education, reading of poems which inspire noble feelings, and training in music which rouses pure thoughts, so that women

⁵⁷ Bose, p. 200.

can become tenderhearted, affectionate, compassionate and genuinely devout to be able to be virtuous and religious minded...⁵⁸

The excessive focus here on purity, moderation and religiosity betrays an anxiety that is not entirely misplaced. The anxiety does not simply arise from the fear that education, which will involve an exposure to the West, might divert women away from their rightful vocation. The construction of the nationalized woman involved not only a very qualified embrace of modernity but also a rejection of a certain stream of tradition. In an insightful cultural analysis, Sumanta Banerjee describes how a vibrant popular culture shared by women across class lines was systematically marginalized in the production of the new woman. The popular cultural forms in Bengal, for instance, like songs, dances, doggerells, theatrical performances, recitations, had a common appeal to Bengali women across economic divisions. The older popular culture with its robust sense of humor, its stark and bitter expression of the plight of women in male-dominated society, and the use of an idiom that was at the same time tough and sensuous was displaced, Banerjee claims, by a new Western educated middle class that was more "moderate" and "cultured" in its tastes.

Education aimed at expunging from the lives of privileged women the "forthright, aggressive and ribald tone of women's popular culture" and the "coarse 'untutored' expletives and expressions' that they shared with women of the streets."⁵⁹ For such cross class women's solidarity and an acknowledgment of independent sexuality that it implied was perceived as a threat by the new patriarchy. Thus in the selection of Western

⁵⁸ Qtd. in Sumanta Banerjee, "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal," *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, p. 162-163.

⁵⁹ Banerjee, p.163.

literature, Victorian texts that portrayed saintly, virtuous and dutiful women in a soft sentimental tone were chosen for instructing and disciplining the untutored minds of upper class women. Similarly, Banerjee tells us, in the selection of traditional Indian texts, stories portraying women departing from their domestic roles and of women as sexually and/or socially assertive were actively suppressed. Thus the regenerated woman of the emergent nation is to be educated and have access to literature and the arts; understand the concept of "companionate marriage" so she can humor her husband with her accomplishments. But as Banerjee reminds us, the new woman is never supposed to forget her "total dependence on the male head of the family and strictly adhere to traditional responsibilities of a respectable home."⁶⁰

Bimala, in our novel, fails to walk the tightrope between "enlightenment" and its pitfalls. In keeping with the expectations of her liberal husband, she receives a Western education and steps out of the inner quarters into the larger social sphere. But instead of being grateful to her husband and repaying him with her renewed loyalty, she falls in love with his friend. Now, this presents the author and his hero, Nikhil with a dilemma that challenges their liberal thought. For Nikhil, to obstruct Bimala from following the dictates of her mind and suppress her freedom would be to admit the limited scope of his liberalism. But to allow Bimala to proceed on her chosen path would mean the destruction of his home and the loss his beloved wife. This interesting dilemma and its resolution are at the core of the novel.

Nikhil chooses the emotionally painful and morally satisfying option of refusing to be a hurdle in the path of his wife's self-discovery. In facilitating his wife's education and

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.165.

entry into the outer world, Nikhil is partly motivated by the desire to test his wife's love for him beyond the confines of the home. Insisting that Bimala step out of the inner quarters, he says to her: "If we meet, and recognize each other, in the real world, then only will our love be true."⁶¹ He of course learns the hard way that he was right in his desire to test his wife's love and devotion towards him. So when he fails to earn his wife's love beyond the restricted confines of his home, he convinces himself that he has to abandon his conventional rights over his wife:

'My wife' -Does that amount to an argument, much less the truth? Can one imprison a whole personality within that name?... Bimala is what she is. It is preposterous to expect that she should assume the role of an angel for my pleasure. The Creator is under no obligation to supply me with angels, just because I have an avidity for imaginary perfection.⁶²

Now, if these were the last words of the novel, that is if the painful resolution of Nikhil's dilemma was the closing sentiment of the text, it would be a different matter. But that's not how Tagore has it. While Nikhil is allowed the nobility of his difficult choice, Bimala is not. Somewhat paradoxically, even as a man's liberalism in allowing his wife her own means to self-realization is applauded, the wife's desire to realize herself is not. One way in which the condemnation of Bimala is achieved in the novel is through its cyclical narrative structure. The novel begins with Bimala reminiscing about her mother; her memory presents the reader with a very powerful and evocative image of the traditional Indian woman grandly effused with the twin ideals of service and sacrifice. Bimala believes that her mother's example had provided her with the "golden provision to

⁶¹ *Home and the World*, p. 23.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 64-65.

carry [her] on [her] own way."⁶³ Thus it is her own devotion and service that she cherishes the most in her relationship with Nikhil. But that, she recalls, was before she was "educated and introduced to the modern age in its own language."⁶⁴ It is because of her education, she now believes, that she wavered from the rightful path of her true vocation as a woman and a wife. The story then is told, in retrospect, by a repentant Bimala, bemoaning the tragic turn of events. Thus in the concluding scene of this cyclical narrative, Bimala is convinced that the destruction of her husband and home has been brought about by her irredeemable lapse in living up to the ideal of womanhood.

The cardinal sin committed by Bimala, according to the author, would be her discovery of her sexuality. The disciplining of female sexuality is of course one of the central tenets of any form of patriarchy. Bimala is hardly free of the spell of patriarchal ideology even in the midst of her infatuation for her husband's friend. Trying to negotiate her own deeply held beliefs with her sexual awakening, she ruminates:

Possibly this is woman's nature. When her passion is roused she loses her sensibility for all that is outside it. When, like the river, we women keep to our banks, we give nourishment with all that we have: when we overflow them we destroy with all that we are.⁶⁵

Bimala recalls the wisdom of patriarchy and feels guilty for having wavered from the "right path." Nikhil, in his grief, takes refuge in the same ideology that compartmentalizes the roles of the sexes:

We, men, are knights whose quest is that freedom to which our ideals call us. She who makes for us the banner under which we fare forth is the true Woman for us. We must tear away the disguise of her who weaves our net of enchantment at

⁶³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

home, and know her for what she is. We must beware of clothing her in the witchery of our longings and imaginings, and thus allow her to distract us from our true quest.⁶⁶

Interestingly, as soon as the project of freeing his wife takes an unforeseen turn, Nikhil becomes obsessed with his own freedom. He wishes to be free from his attachment to his wife. Of course Nikhil and his author's argument will be that Bimala, in exploring her sexuality, was not following the path of "true freedom," designated for a woman.

Sandip, the outsider, the destroyer of home, draws on a different ideology to explain his relationship with Bimala. Sandip, the antithesis to everything that Nikhil stands for, wishes for the "western military style to prevail" in politics. In the sphere of personal relationships, he again derives his values from the West where passion is viewed as something to be celebrated. So when Sandip finds Bimala riddled with doubts in her attraction for him, he tries to make her "come to the conviction that to acknowledge and respect passion as the supreme reality, is to be modern - not to be ashamed of it, not to glorify restraint." Sandip thus uncritically glorifies Western modernity and repudiates his native culture in the spheres of both the "home" and the "world."

The allegedly devastating potential of "illicit" female sexuality is equated in the novel with its second target--radical nationalism. Bimala herself makes the connection between sexual passion and radical nationalist politics:

I saw my country, a woman like myself, standing expectant. She has been drawn forth from her home corner by the sudden call of some unknown. She has had no time to pause or ponder....as she rushes into the darkness ahead. I know very well how her very soul responds to the distant flute strains.... There is no call to her of their children in their hunger, no home to be lighted of an evening, no household work to be done... She has left home, forgotten domestic duties; she has nothing

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 110.

but an unfathomable yearning which hurries her on - by what road, to what goal, she reckons not. I also am possessed of just such a yearning.... Both the end and the means have become equally shadowy to me...⁶⁷

Bimala is, however, not the only one to compare her sexual awakening with the nationalist movement. Sandip, when confronted with the possibility of having to choose between the political cause and Bimala, coalesces the two and declares, "I will make Bimala one with my country."⁶⁸ And as critics have noted, the ideological conflict between Nikhil and Sandip represents their struggle for Bimala who is symbolic of the nation. Indeed the comparison of a woman, ruled by her sexual passion, with a nation, enthused by violent radicalism, is intended to be one of the central motifs of the text. As mentioned earlier, Tagore had grown a clear distaste for the extremist brand of nationalist politics involving violence and coercion. Commenting on the equation of what the author perceives to be violent nationalism with female sexuality, Sangeeta Ray correctly observes that in the "imagining of nationalism as a devouring female... Tagore's critique is rendered shrilly censorious."⁶⁹

The possibility of Bimala's self-realization remains hostage first to her husband and then her lover's attempts at appropriating her selfhood. This is consistent with Chatterjee's claim that a new form of patriarchy frames the nationalist bourgeoisie's project of women's emancipation. Bimala's exploration of her own sexuality is frustrated by Sandip's attempts at imposing on her his discourse of passion and its desirability. While Sandip's "Western" ideology is clearly repudiated in the text, Nikhil's desire to facilitate

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 93-94.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

⁶⁹ Sangeeta Ray, p. 100.

his wife's entry into the wider world is upheld. The novel, however, provides enough instances to expose the hollowness of Nikhil's "enlightened" attitude towards his wife. Bimala, for instance, takes a large sum of money on Sandip's behest from the household, without consulting Nikhil. The money, Sandip tells her, is urgently required for organizational work. This act of "stealing" by Bimala from her own home is presented in the text as the ultimate act of transgression. For all the "freedom" that her husband bestows on her, Bimala is not free to make a monetary donation without her husband's knowledge and acquiescence. Nikhil, however, we learn in early in the novel, has himself been long making donations to Sandip in spite of Bimala's displeasure. But that, the reader is expected to understand, is his male prerogative.

The ingrained vacuousness of the act of "providing freedom" to women is revealed in the text in spite of the author's stated ideology. Bimala suffers deeply in her attraction towards Sandip as she is torn by the agony of having to reconcile her spontaneous attraction to another man with her unflinching loyalty to her husband. Patriarchal ideology renders her incapable of comprehending, leave alone justifying, her own psychological and physical needs. Nikhil, with all his liberal magnanimity, is unable to comprehend the nature of Bimala's struggle. It is his own attempt to detach himself from Bimala that occupies him and in an apparent act of great self-abnegation, he declares to Bimala that she is under no obligation to him and should consider herself free. Bimala's response captures the worthlessness of this gesture that negates the contextual complexity of her situation: "And then the other day in the garden, how easy my husband found it to tell me that he set me free! But can freedom-empty freedom be given and

taken so easily as that? It is like setting a fish free in the sky."⁷⁰ Bimala's response to Nikhil also characterizes the crippling limitations of the nationalist agenda of women's emancipation.

The turn of events leading to a tragic outcome in the novel leaves the reader with many unanswered questions. Sandip, in spite of his charismatic personality, turns out to be a crooked, self-serving, hypocrite and Bimala, finally able to see him for what he is, finds herself repelled by him. But how, the reader wonders, would the conflict be resolved if Sandip was not a villainous character. Similarly, Nikhil had to be this heroic, self-effacing and a morally righteous man, for Bimala to see the stark contrast between the object of her infatuation and her husband. But what if Nikhil was not the hero that the author makes him out to be? Finally, what if Bimala could have viewed the choice between her husband and her lover as irrelevant compared to the possibilities for self-actualization? But such questions are ultimately irrelevant, primarily because they are extraneous to the intent of the text. The novel is not meant to probe the psychological twists and turns of a triangular love-story, even less is it intended to inspire the liberation of women.

In the ultimate analysis, *Home and the World* is a fable that preaches the importance of disciplining women. And as in all fables, the characters only represent ideas. In the conflict between the world and the home, Sandip, the outsider, personifies the threat to the disciplined and harmonious sphere of the home. Nikhil, for all his western education and liberal views, is an "agent for the preservation of an older familial

⁷⁰ *The Home and the World*, p. 137.

system and its associated values."⁷¹ Indeed Nikhil represents the desirable nationalist combination of liberal ideology with traditional identity. But, it is women, as Chatterjee reminds us, who have to personify the combined strength of native identity and modernity. Bimala's tragedy in failing to serve as this nationalist icon of womanhood serves as a warning, of the precarious balance that needs to be maintained between the forces of the home and the world.

The simultaneous mobilization and disciplining of women in the nationalist cause is consistent with the native elite's treatment of other subaltern groups. Nikhil, as I maintain, represents the interests and aspirations of the nationalist elite. His differences with Sandip, on the desirability of coercive tactics, signify only a different approach to the nationalist struggle, not its rejection. Nikhil, as I discuss earlier, reflects his author's view that the working poor of the country should not have to make sacrifices for the nationalist cause. The issue is extremely pertinent in the context of the nationalist movement organized around the economic boycott of British goods and services. The boycott of cheap and superior imported merchandise for expensive and inferior locally produced ones spelt financial disaster for small merchants. The novel has been roundly applauded for reflecting what has been viewed to be Tagore's progressive critique of the boycott movement and its deleterious impact on the underprivileged classes. Critics, I think, make a mistake in selectively praising one aspect of the author's thought without situating it within his larger world-view.

The fact that the underprivileged pays a dear price for joining the struggle against colonialism need not, in and of itself, be viewed to be problematic. It is in the interest of

⁷¹ Mitra, p. 248.

the working classes to fight colonialism and envision a just social order. The involvement of the underprivileged classes becomes questionable only when the native leadership harnesses the movement in its own future interests of financial and political power. Now, that might well have been the case in the Indian Independence movement but Tagore makes no distinction between bourgeois and popular anti-colonialism. There is a critical contradiction in his position i.e. his critique of the movement for its treatment of the poor never led him to question the feudal system of landownership that creates and perpetuates a class of indigent peasantry. Tagore's critique of *swadeshi* is made very much from *within* the class position of the nationalist elite. His critique of *swadeshi* and boycott is only an appeal for tactical changes; it does not constitute a rejection of the elitist orientation of the national movement.

Nikhil, the benevolent feudal landlord, like his author, is pained by the existence of poverty in his estate and always ready to lend a helping hand to the needy. The value of Tagore's sympathy for the underprivileged notwithstanding, he never turned his back on the feudal system as he did on the *swadeshi* movement. A feudal landlord himself, Tagore did not consider the desirability of overhauling the feudal system; he only wanted to make it more humane. And herein lies the commonality between the author's position on class and gender. His belief that the condition of the impoverished needs alleviation parallels his conviction that Indian women should be ushered into the modern age through education and social exposure. What *Home and the World* does not address are the *structural causes* for gender and class disparity i.e. patriarchy and feudalism. Tagore's hero, Nikhil, represents the nationalist elite that believes in "reaching out to the masses" while actively working towards keeping traditional hierarchical structures in place.

Jameson's celebration of third world nationalism has been refuted on the ground that nationalism can always coexist with exploitative power structures. Nationalism does not necessarily reflect the will and the interests of the people. Nussbaum questions nationalism for its particularism, its divisive orientation and thus its failure to prioritize the common humanity of all people. She, however, does not engage with the issue of nationalism and its collusion with exploitative structures. This critical oversight in her critique of nationalism tellingly reflects in her proposed alternative of internationalism. Her appreciative reading of internationalism in *Home and the World* becomes problematic for its evasion of the questionable gender politics at the heart of the novel. She is unable to connect the rhetoric of internationalism with the politics of patriarchy. In thus disassociating the ideology of internationalism with its coexisting power structures in the novel, she erases the difference between the object of her critique--nationalism--and her desired alternative--internationalism. Ideologies like nationalism and internationalism can be harnessed for various political ends and it's those political aims that justify any ideology, not the other way round.

CHAPTER 3 PARTITIONED COMMUNITIES: THE NATION AND ITS RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Introduction

The birth of the independent nations of India and Pakistan took place amidst the ravage wrought by the Partition of the subcontinent. The much-awaited moment of freedom from colonial domination was also the time for the division of the land and its people into two countries based on religious identity. In the communal holocaust that accompanied the formation of the two nations, three million people lost their lives, over a million women were raped and/or abducted, and there was the devastating loss and misery of ten million uprooted lives--the result of the largest migration known in human history. The potent seeds of hate and suspicion that have taken roots in civil society have proved to be the lasting legacy of the Partition.

In India the leaders of the postcolonial nation state, partly as a response to the havoc wreaked by the politics of religious identity, made a constitutional commitment to the ideal of secularism--the separation of religion and state. The commitment was made in the hope of laying the foundation of a national community that would be inclusive of its people regardless of their religious faith. In actuality, however, since Independence, the nightmare of Partition has become a recurring one in the form of communal tensions and riots, often encouraged, if not engineered, by organs of the state. At present, with a Hindu fundamentalist party in power, the nation state has marked an almost decisive break from the ideal of secular nationalism. This chapter focuses on the victims of an

ideology primarily based on othering religious communities that happen to be smaller in number. The plight of religious minorities all over the Indian subcontinent is marked by the same devastating sense of non-belonging and alienation from nations that are ostensibly their own.

The chapter begins with an overview of the colonial construction of communalism and the nationalist challenge to that construction. The nationalist questioning of colonial presumptions about the essentially communal character of the country, notwithstanding, I argue that there is a certain continuity between the colonial and the postcolonial approach to the issue of religious identity. The suppression of the lived reality of the Partition is a telling instance of the nation's questionable approach to communalism. The chapter offers readings from literary narratives about the Partition to highlight the nature of that crucial event, so often glossed over in nationalist discourse. There is an even greater suppression of another aspect of postcolonial life in the dominant narrative of nationalism – the predicament of the religious minorities in the nation state. The disaffection of the minority communities, I believe, potentially poses a grave threat to the ideal and claim of nationhood. I offer readings of literary narratives from across the subcontinent to foreground the nature of marginalization and the sense of alienation of religious minorities. The literary readings regarding the Partition and the life of minorities in the postcolonial nation discussed in the context of the history and the politics of the subcontinent is offered here in the hope of the possibilities for a more inclusive nationalism.

Communalism and its Construction

The word “communalism,” an extremely familiar one in the lexicon of and about the Indian subcontinent, is hardly ever used in the Western context. In its popular usage,

communalism refers to the kind of allegiance to one's religious community that gives rise to a state of hostility and fear towards members of other religious communities. In a larger and more academic sense, it also includes organized political movements around the proclaimed interests of specific religious communities. Bipan Chandra, a nationalist historian, for instance, describes communalism as the "belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have as a result, common social, political and economic interests."¹ It is significant that the word has never been used in a similar sense to describe a comparable social phenomenon in the West.

Communalism, Gyanendra Pandey argues in his study of the phenomenon in colonial North India, is a "form of colonial knowledge."² Pandey observes that the study of the phenomenon gained its prominence in the historical writings of conservative colonialists around the turn of the century. For these writers, communalism is the closest version of nationalism that the subcontinent could produce. By the end of the nineteenth century, nationalism was viewed clearly as the discourse of the West, an attribute of the new nation-states of Europe and something to be consciously denied to the colonized world. Communalism, on the other hand, was a convenient and suitable substitute for the purpose of othering the subject population. Unlike nationalism, with its active connotation of the collective agency of a people in the act of self-governance, communalism carries the signification of the basic or essential nature of a population. In the way that "tribalism" is used as an essential descriptive attribute for African populations, communalism similarly denotes the allegedly natural and fixed state of the

¹ Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*. (Delhi: Vikas, 1984) p. 1.

² Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism In Colonial North India*. (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1990) p. 6

Indian people with their religious bigotry and irrationality. For the colonialist, it brilliantly captures the proclaimed difference of subject populations, "history," as Pandey rightly comments, is seen as happening to these people, "it can hardly be a process in which they play a conscious and significant part."³

The nationalists of course rejected the preposterous proposition that India, because of its fundamental communalist nature, was unable to form itself into a nation. Nationalists challenged the colonialist view that the state of hostility between religious communities termed as communalism was something intrinsic to the country. It was not that the nationalists denied the existence of the phenomenon of communalism, but they sought to explain it in terms of politics and economics rather than evoking the myth of the essential nature of the country. Indeed the recognition of and the engagement with the phenomenon of communalism became one of the central agendas for the nationalist leadership. The state of strife between the two major communities, Hindus and Muslims, made it harder to erect a unified nationalist front in the struggle against the powerful imperialists. Communalism thus came to be viewed as a major political hurdle in the path to independent nationhood.

In an interesting twist, even as nationalists opposed the colonialist premise about the inherently communal character of the country, they also shared the other crucial aspect of the colonialist belief--that nationalism was antithetical to communalism. If the British erased the sociality of the Indian people with essentialist constructions in the interests of the colonial state, the nationalists similarly chose to gloss over the social and cultural nuances of the relations between religious communities, this time in the alleged

³ Ibid., p. 10

interests of the nationalist state. Thus if the interests of the state determined the colonialist discourse on communalism, a similar tendency is clearly inherited by nationalist discourse.

In the first part of the chapter, I foreground a remarkable fallout of the statist approach to communalism in nationalist discourse--the occlusion of a comprehensive study of the Partition. In the second part, I focus on another aspect of the postcolonial nation state's approach to communalism--an active encouragement of the politics of religious identity. It is my contention that the two seemingly discrepant aspects of the postcolonial state's engagement with communalism--suppression and encouragement--are actually complementary to each other. In both cases the actuality of the phenomenon of communalism, its place in civil society, is evaded in the interests of the nationalist elite in charge of the state.

Partition Narratives

The celebratory narrative of the inception of the new nation in India (as in Pakistan) carefully hides the story of the incredibly long and painful labor accompanying the birth. Jawaharlal Nehru's famous speech heralding the midnight hour of Indian independence does not even contain a passing reference to the communal holocaust resulting from the Partition. The rise of the Indian nation state and the national bourgeoisie framed as the story of the Indian Independence movement has been the staple of nationalist historiography. Dominant nationalist historiography has hardly any space for the parallel history of the price for nation building--the massacre of millions of people in the name of religion.

Partition has never really been treated by nationalist historians as an integral part of the nation's history. Instead it is viewed as an anomaly, a blip in the progressivist

national narrative, something to be briefly acknowledged and bypassed.⁴ The glaring lacunae in nation's history is understandable when viewed as a legacy of the nationalist leadership. The leadership made the strange and ominous choice of turning a blind eye to the tremendous sociological implications of the Partition and instead proceeded to treat it as a mere administrative exercise. The elision of the social, leave alone the human, aspect of Partition is remarkable, for instance, in the following sentiments of Vallabhbhai Patel, the first home minister of Independent India:

Even though we were overwhelmed by the disturbances after the Independence Day, we have accomplished a great deal. We have carried out successfully and effectively the separation of armed services, stores, both civilian and military, and of many other large undertakings incidental to Partition.... *In addition we have carried out an exchange of forty to fifty lakhs of people on each side.* Any government in the world would have been overwhelmed by such tremendous responsibilities, but thank god we have weathered the storm and turned the corner (emphasis added).⁵

The Partition here is shorn of all socio-historical meaning, it is instead reduced to a mammoth administrative task. More significantly, the "exchange of forty to fifty lakhs of people" equated with the similar division of various services, is a remarkable instance of the statist and elitist approach to the issue. It is the same approach that is so strongly evident in nationalist historiography.

Nationalist history has consistently viewed communalism as the product of an anachronistic form of consciousness out of tune with a modern, industrialized, democratic society. Bipan Chandra, for instance, laments the political failure of the Indian state to "disseminate among the people a modern, scientific understanding and

⁴ See Gyanendra Pandey, "The Prose of Otherness," *Subaltern Studies*, eds. David Arnold and David Hardiman, vol 8 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994)

⁵ Vallabhbhai Patel, *Speeches of Patel: For A United India*, (Delhi: Publications Division, Old Secretariat, 1950) p. 135

awareness of nationalism.”⁶ Unfortunately a history that writes off a form of consciousness (communal) as a mere anachronistic inconvenience to be replaced by a superior consciousness (nationalist) remains out of touch with the sociality of the people that it claims to represent. Nationalist history has thus consistently and systematically denied representation to the numerous identities that lie outside the broad parameters of nationalism. The search for a “pure” nationalism in India since the 1920s, for instance, Pandey rightly points out, denies any significance to the notion that an Indian is also a Hindu or a Muslim, a man or a woman, a Bengali or a Punjabi, a worker or a shopkeeper; for purposes of official historiography as also popular representation, an Indian remained an Indian and nothing more.⁷

Partition Literature

The literary readings that follow provide a glimpse into the marginalized history of the Partition. In the literature of the subcontinent, written during and about the Partition of the country, what emerges are at times startling insights and at others a reasoned cognizance of the system. But whether written from the point of view of the perplexed victim or that of the questioning rebel, these literary pieces always provide unmatched insights into the fabric of everyday life of the common people in that tumultuous period. The literature of the period thus makes room for a subaltern perspective on the unfolding events so starkly missing in elite historiography. It is in the pages of fiction that the dry, statist history of nationalism is repudiated and alternative visions of collectivity signaled.

⁶ Bipan Chandra, *Communalism and the Writing of Indian History*. (Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1969) p. 41

⁷ Gyanendra Pandey, “Questions of Nationalism and Communalism,” *Economic and Political Weekly* June 20 (1987) : 983-4.

Kamleshwar's story "How Many Pakistan?" for instance, questions the idea that a category like "national boundary" can only be conceptualized in terms of large political structures. The title itself questions a unitary meaning of "Pakistan" by insisting on broadening the signification of the noun (Pakistan) to include the affective and the symbolic realms. For the Hindu narrator of the story, the Partition of the country means an exile from his hometown and the loss of his Muslim lover. As the narrator wanders from one riot torn city to another, he finds his own sense alienation and loss reflected in the lives of numerous others: "such a long journey ... and yet .. Pakistan confronts me at every turn."⁸ Pakistan here becomes this inescapable metaphorical presence encapsulating the agony of severance at myriad levels.

Nationalist narratives in both India and Pakistan describe the mechanics of the division of land in the process of carving out national boundaries. "Land" is treated in these narratives as a mere geographical entity to be divided between political contestants. Kamleshwar's story, however, assigns land and space with meanings and associations that are impossible to partition or divide. The narrator, as a refugee in a strange city, fondly recalls his hometown:

Chunar! My home, your home! A brick lane passed in front of my house, leading to the town bazaars. Winding along the banks of the Ganga, it reached the big gateway of Bharathari Maharaj's fort.

Where the lane turned towards the fort there was a toll office. Taxes were levied on the goods brought in by the boats, and unloaded at the ganga ghat. Fish, crab, turtles were brought; mangoes too, in the right season. The munshi at the toll office went about his work muttering the name of Ram to himself all day, and collecting grain in lieu of tax. He poured holy water on the Shiva idol under the peepal tree at least ten times a day, and tutored some boys on the rooftop.

⁸ Kamleshwar, "How Many Pakistan?" in *Translating Partition*, eds. Ravikant and Tarun K Saint (New Delhi, Katha, 2001) p. 12

Near the toll office was an elbow turn. On the left a brick road went towards the fort. The road coming in from the left that joined it was unpaved. Running water had made gullies for itself in that lane, drains almost, the water slowly drying up on the sandy riverbank. Many small lanes were parallel to the gullies - lanes crisscrossed by water channels. These were Banno's lanes.

Where Banno's lanes came to an end, a paved road began, which went up to the mission school - a reconverted English bungalow. Here one found the mehendi bushes, and the maidan, overgrown with thorn-apple bushes.⁹

The banal particularities of a small town are rendered poignant in the memories of the exiled narrator. It is these particularities, the precious life associations surrounding a lived space, that are eluded in the nationalist historiography of the Partition.

There are also other casualties when a land and its people are torn asunder. Banno's (the narrator's lover) father, a Muslim scholar, has been engaged in translating the Sanskrit classic *Bharatharinama* into colloquial Urdu. It is an illuminating instance of a composite ethos where a Muslim scholar is translating a "high culture" Hindu literary text into Urdu (an offshoot of the Persian language, used by the Muslims of the subcontinent). It speaks not merely about the interests of one translator, but, as one commentator points out, is a "characteristic of the pluralism the country has always generated."¹⁰ Not surprisingly, with the onslaught of communal politics, it is this cultural pluralism that comes under attack. In a climate where every signifier of the other community is suspect, translating a Sanskrit text does not help Master sahab (the translator) and those close to him.

The story uses various motifs of severance and separation to signify the different kinds of loss--of land, love, language, culture--brought about by the single event of the

⁹ Ibid., p. 14

¹⁰ Stuti Khanna, "'How Many Pakistans?': An Overview" in *Translating Partition*, p. 110

Partition. "How many Pakistans were made," the narrator wonders, "with the making of one?"¹¹ The figure of the exiled narrator, wandering in his futile search for recovery and wholeness presents the central motif of partition. There is also the recurring image of dismemberment in, for instance, the limb factory where the narrator works for a while and then in the description of how the narrator's grandfather's arms were cut off in a fight. Painful flashes of the sense of loss in myriad forms abound in the story. The narrator hears of how Banno loses her new born child in a riot, he is also an unwitting witness to the strangely agonizing scene of Banno, naked and writhing in pain, with the unattended milk in her full breasts. The actual stories of people caught in their divided existence are coalesced with metaphorical images of severance: "like flowers without colour, or with colour but no fragrance, or with fragrance but no breeze."¹² Meaningful human relationships become hard to form, the narrator realizes, as "all of us are writhing under the burden of our own individual Pakistans ... partial, incomplete..."¹³

In the end as the wandering narrator feels that there is no place "where there is no Pakistan ... where [he] can become whole again," he wonders whether the Partition was inevitable: "was it fated to be like this?"¹⁴ The question of the inevitability of Partition has haunted both the historiography and the literature of Pakistan. It is understandable that the inevitability of an event, which victimized millions of unwitting people, would be questioned. It is this issue that is at the heart of Bhishma Sahani's story "Pali." The issue of historical inevitability is invariably connected to the question of human agency. If a

¹¹ "How Many Pakistans?" p. 12

¹² Ibid., p. 13

¹³ Ibid., 26

¹⁴ Bhishma Sahani, "Pali" in *Translating Partition*, p. 28

historical event is viewed to be inevitable, then it follows that human agency is not a significant factor in the unfolding of the event. In Sahani's story, the underlying presumption is the inevitability of the Partition and human "actors" are portrayed as inadvertently caught in the whirlwind of the turbulent event.

The story narrates a saga of the kind of loss and misery that was all too common in the lives of Partition refugees. Manohar Lal, his wife, Kaushalya with their two children, Pali, a boy of four and an infant girl, undertake the journey with millions of other Hindus from the newly formed state of Pakistan to India. Journeys across the border on either side were almost invariably marked with instances of communal rioting, traveling refugees were attacked, looted and often raped and killed by zealots of the other community. In the crowd and confusion of thousands of refugees, Manohar and Kaushalya lose their son, Pali. Later their convoy is attacked and the infant girl dies of injuries. The couple arrives in India bereft of their children. Manohar, unable to bear the unrelenting grief of his wife, undertakes several arduous journeys back to Pakistan in search of his son, Pali. After several years he is successful in locating his son, now adopted by a Muslim couple. He is also able to legally reclaim Pali and bring him back home. But the atmosphere of communal suspicion and hatred allow for no relief or solace for the characters till the very end. Pali's adoption by the Muslim couple had been followed by his zealous conversion to Islam managed by the leaders of the community. In a reenactment of that event, Pali is reconverted to Hinduism with much fanfare by the Hindu community once he is brought back by Manohar. The story thus ends on a note of helplessness of both sets of parents and the image of the innocent child as the victim of communal zealots.

The events of the story, as mentioned earlier, are fairly typical of the experiences of Partition refugees. Critical interest in the story is elicited not so much by the undoubtedly incisive portrayal of the harrowing events in the lives of the characters as the author's perspective on the historic time. The dominant characteristic of the story is its pessimistic determinism, the feeling that the course of events could not have been any different, of a merciless destiny always looming large. The story begins with the authorial view on an existential sense of inevitability and human helplessness:

Life goes on and on. Its ends never meet. Neither in the mundane world of realities, nor in fiction. We drag on drearily in the hope that some day these ends may meet. And sometimes we have the illusion that the ends have really joined.... But knots of life never get fully resolved even in stories, much less in one's life. No sooner is one knot untied than another knot forms its place. The story thus never comes to an end.¹⁵

In a rather interesting move, the writer has ensured that the determinism of life also engulfs the creativity of the author. The reader is forewarned that the story would have no sense of resolution, much less a happy ending. Just as the characters of the story have no say in the events surrounding and determining their lives, the author is supposed to have no control over his own story.

Manohar and Kaushalaya have no control on the events that shape their life: the circumstances that make them into refugees, the loss of Pali, the attack on their convoy, the death of their infant, the course of Pali's future--determined less by them and more by the religious zealots of their community. Similarly the Muslim couple who adopt Pali give their acquiescence for Pali's conversion to Islam even though the religion of their adopted child made no difference to them. They are, however, forced to be participants in the politics of religious identity. The narrative ends with the dejected couple making

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 30

plans to occasionally visit their son who now is with his birth parents. But the reader knows that with the hardening of borders between the two countries, those plans will not succeed. Humans, in the world of this short story, are thus pitted against large circumstances in a battle that they are always fated to lose.

If desire and destiny or humans and history are clearly posed as antagonists, then so is the issue of morality and its opposite. Interestingly, even as individual characters are practically shorn of all agency, they are always morally upright in the face of an adverse world. In its depiction of communalism then, the dehumanizing and exclusivist politics of religious identity is always located outside the individual consciousness. The primary characters of the story are only victims of the vicious politics of communalism, never its perpetrators. Pali, the little boy, whose childhood becomes a casualty of a narrow and frenzied politics, thus becomes symbolic of the common man. Sahani's creed of pessimistic determinism is then deployed by a stark polarization of the social and the individual.

Even though Sahani's vision may help capture the travails of common people who became hapless victims of the Partition, I would contend that its naturalistic logic does not do justice to the historical moment. In completely undermining the issue of individual moral responsibility for the horrors of Partition holocaust, Sahani undercuts the dialectical aspect of a persevering social phenomenon. The large confluence of social and political forces necessary for the continuing communal politics in the subcontinent has to work in tandem with common people who subscribe to fundamentalist ideologies. In presenting the former as solely responsible for communalism, Sahani unwittingly shows us the flip side of the statist view of history. As indicated earlier, the nationalist/statist

historiography of the subcontinent views the Partition basically in terms of transfer of power leaving no room for the perspective of civil society. Now, even as Sahani's story focuses on civil society, its naturalist vision does not allow for an ideological or cultural reading of the politics of communalism. Sahani presents a picture of civil society that is only a *reflection* of large sociological forces with no autonomy of its own, thus mirroring the statist view of history.

Partition literature does offer, however, numerous instances of the collusion of politics and ideology, of large forces and the common man that present a more nuanced view of the period. The stories of Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the finest instances in Indian literature, delineate the involvement and responsibility of common people in the Partition holocaust thus allowing for an appreciation of the ideological aspect of the politics of religious identity. Manto, considered to be the "most controversial and most widely read Urdu short story writer,"¹⁶ captured the painful reality of Partition in both his life and fiction.¹⁷ The following readings of a selection of Manto's stories attempt an appreciation of the telling glimpses provided by the writer into the of the ideology of communal violence.

Manto's fiction often offer a view of the Partition from the perspective of women, shedding light on the deeply patriarchal aspect of the politics of religious/ethnic identity. His story, "The Return," documents the horrific violence of a gendered society with the economy of style characteristic of the writer's art. The story begins with a brief

¹⁶ Gopi Chand Narang, "Introduction," *The Best of Manto*, ed. and trans. Jai Ratan (New Delhi: Sterling, 1989).

¹⁷ See *The Life and Works of Sa'adat Hasan Manto*, ed. Leslie Fleming, trans. Tahira Naqvi (Lahore: Vangiard, 1985).

description of a site that aptly captures the essence of the Partition— a train full of refugees leaving their homeland for a new nation. The matter of fact tone narrating the setting makes the description that much more chilling: “The special train left Amritsar at two in the afternoon, arriving at Mughalpura, Lahore, eight hours later. Many had been killed on the way, a lot more injured and countless lost.”¹⁸ The narrative then zooms in on one refugee, Sirajuddin, who has been unconscious for a long while after the train arrived at Lahore. He gains consciousness to find his wife and daughter missing. He is able to recall the image of his dying wife with “her stomach ripped open.”¹⁹ He is, however, unable to remember at what point he lost track of his seventeen-year-old daughter, Sakina. Sirajuddin spends the next few days in a desperate attempt to locate his daughter. The story ends with Sirajuddin’s reunion with his daughter. The reunion, however, comes with a twist that has made the story justly famous. Sirajuddin happens to find his daughter unconscious on a hospital bed. A doctor checking the condition of the young woman asks Sirajuddin to open the window. The word “open” has an effect on the comatose woman: “[h]er hands groped for the cord which kept her *shalwar* tied round her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs.”²⁰ The story ends with the bitter irony of the hapless father overjoyed at the sight of a sign of life in his daughter even as the movement that signals that she is alive is one of surrendering herself to rape. The significance of the story lies not merely in its effective portrayal of sexual violence but also of the ideological nature of such violence.

¹⁸ “The Return,” Saadat Hasan Manto, *Kingdom's End and Other Stories*. (New Delhi, India : Penguin Books, 1989) p.35

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 36

²⁰ Ibid., p. 38

The mass rapes that hundreds of thousands of women were subjected to were not something controlled by the state. It was the public and blatant aspect of the everyday violence of a patriarchal society that is necessarily rendered visible in times of ethnic strife.

Manto's story sheds light on an area that has always been peripheral to histories of Partition; it is only in some recent feminist scholarship that women's experiences in that period and its theoretical implications have been subjects of serious exploration.²¹ The tremendous violence unleashed against women during the period is in itself enough justification for a reassessment of the Partition and by implication of the politics of identity formation. Like men, women became victims of large-scale violence accompanying mass hysteria, but unlike men, the gendered nature of violence perpetrated against women calls for special attention. In their study of the Partition from the perspective of its female victims, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin observe:

we begin to discern some specific features of "communal" crimes against women: their brutality, their extreme sexual violence and their collective nature. The range of sexual violation explicit in the above accounts – stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans; amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing fetuses – is shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells us about women as objects in male construction of their own honour. Women's sexuality symbolizes "manhood"; its desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonour that *it has to be avenged*. Yet, with the cruel logic of all such violence, it is women ultimately who are most violently dealt with as a consequence.²²

The victimization of women was not always perpetrated only by the other community, women often suffered very violent fates within their own communities. A

²¹ See, for instance, Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices From the Partition of India*. (New Delhi: Viking, 1998); Urvashi Butalia, "Community, State and Gender: On Women's agency During Partition," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28.17 (1993) : 12-24; Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. (New Delhi, Kali For Women, 1998)

²² *Borders and Boundaries* p. 43

typical form of such violence were mass “suicides” performed by women. It was asserted by community leaders that death was preferable to being subdued by men of the other community and women were thus pressured to kill themselves to preserve their “honor” and by implication the “honor” of their community. The logic of such defensive violence is really no different from the sexual attack on women by men of other communities. In both cases, *women are made to bear the brunt of communal identity*. Partha Chatterjee has shown how women become the carriers of the cultural identity of nations, signifying a nation’s difference and therefore its identity.²³ In a similar process, sexual violence against women becomes an expression of asserting difference in the politics of religious/ethnic identity.

The objectification of women in the interests of nation, religion, freedom and identity has naturally not formed a part of dominant historiography. Voices in the literary discourse of the subcontinent, however, sometimes provide telling glimpses into the nature of such patriarchal subjugation and its implications. Anis Kidwai’s poem, for instance, in foregrounding the inner travails of female victims, displaces all large ideological claims surrounding the Partition:

There are many young, half-mad women who keep laughing-
 Perhaps at all of us, at the country,
 at religion and the propagators of these religions,
 at government and their laws.
 Maybe they laugh at freedom-

²³ See Partha Chatterjee, “The Nation and its Women” in *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993)

Who knows what they are laughing at?²⁴

Manto's stories explore another area in all its intricacies and ironies--of soldiers defending the borders of the newly forged states of India and Pakistan. The underlying irony in these narratives emerges from the seemingly simple idea that soldiers sharing a common historical and cultural heritage are suddenly posed as adversaries in the interests of protecting *their* history and culture. In "The Last Salute," Rab Nawaz, a soldier fighting for the newborn state of Pakistan, is assailed by unanswerable puzzles. Why was he fighting against men who were his countrymen till the other day? He thought of the soldiers on both sides who were told by the powers that be that:

we are placing a gun in your hands so you can go and fight for a country which you have yet to know, where you do not even have a roof over your head, where even the air and water are strange to you. Go and fight for it against...the land where you were born and grew up.²⁵

He is plagued by the intricacies of religious identity: "Were the Pakistani soldiers fighting for Kashmir or for the Muslims of Kashmir? If they were being asked to fight in defense of the Muslims of Kashmir, why had they been not asked to fight for the Muslims of the princely states of Junagarh and Hyderabad?"²⁶ The logic of the formation of nation states is no less complex - [f]ormerly, all of them were Indian soldiers, but now some were Indian and others were Pakistani soldiers." And finally Rab Nawaz reaches one answer to all his questions which even in its simplicity, questions all ideological justifications for the Partition: "[He] had finally come to the conclusion that such intricate and subtle matters were beyond the comprehension of a simple soldier. A soldier must be

²⁴ Qtd. in *Borders and Boundaries*, p.66

²⁵ Saadat Hasan Manto, "The Last Salute," in *Kingdom's End and Other Stories*, p. 26

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27

thick in the head. Only the thick headed made good soldiers."²⁷ Such is the irrationality behind the "logic" of Partition that it can be accepted and defended only by making it unquestionable.

"The Dog of Tetwal," another story by Manto, poignantly captures the dehumanizing aspects of national and communal identity. The story begins with its setting in spring, with the scent of wild flowers, the song of birds and the lazy buzz of bees, and "it seemed as if summer and winter had made their peace and in the blue skies, cotton clouds floated all day like barges on a lake."²⁸ Against this backdrop of nature taking its course, the newly formed armies of India and Pakistan are entrenched in their adversarial positions. The soldiers on both sides, however, share the same Punjabi language and cultural background and behave in identical ways. Ironically, the anxiety on both sides to be identified as different becomes another marker of their similarity.

There is a lull in the war and the soldiers are unable to find something to fight for. But as fear and hatred need an "objective correlative," a street dog, craving human affection, becomes such an object. The dog is at first entertained by both the Indian and Pakistani soldiers and each side semi-playfully tries to affix their own national identity on the dog. But as it becomes clear to both sides that the dog is "at home" on the other side, the helpless animal becomes the victim of communal ideology. It is tortured by soldiers from across the borders and killed. The dog thus comes to signify the dehumanizing effect of communalist/nationalist ideology. The implication that even an animal cannot be allowed the freedom from a fixed identity testifies, as has been noted by commentators of

²⁷ Ibid., p. 27

²⁸ Saadat Hasan Manto, "The Dog of Tetwal," in *Kingdom's End*, p.19

the story, to the “absolutization of difference.”²⁹ At yet another level, Manto seems to point at not only the perversion of those who are made to internalize such an ideology of difference but also its devastating impact on those who manage to retain their humanity by escaping it.

I end my readings in this section with Manto’s story, “Toba Tek Singh,” the classic of Partition literature and as one critic calls it, “the Partition story that all Partition stories aspires to be.”³⁰ The story is an metaphorical representation of the sheer “irrationality” of the historical moment captured through a portrayal of those, that such an order declares to be “irrational.” The world of communal frenzy is captured through a Foucauldian inversion of madness and civilization. The narrative is set at a time when the country has just been partitioned in what was hoped to be the finale of a long period of communal blood bath. In a world that has supposedly successfully resolved questions of identity, the lunatic asylum becomes the only place where such resolutions are still being questioned. Thus the inmates of an asylum wonder:

Were they in Hindustan or Pakistan? If they were in Hindustan, then where was Pakistan? If they were in Pakistan, how could it be possible that only a short while ago they were in Hindustan? How could they be at two places at the same time? In Hindustan a short while ago and now suddenly in Pakistan?³¹

Toba Tek Singh, the mad man, unable to comprehend the mad transactions of lands between India and Pakistan, wants to know, to which country does his native land now belong. Unfortunately, the answer that he receives also belongs to the uncomprehending

²⁹ Ravikant and Tarun K. Saint “‘The Dog of Tetwal in Context’: The Nation and its Victims,” in *Kingdom’s End*, p.97

³⁰ Arjun Mahey, “Partition Narratives: Some Observations” in *Kingdom’s End*, p.152

³¹ Saadat Hasan Manto, “Toba Tek Singh,” in *Kingdom’s End*, p. 53

world of sanity : "'Where? Why, its where it always was.'"³² In depicting Toba Tek Singh's palpable anguish of incomprehension, Manto, as Arjun Mahey in his reading of the story observes:

... reproduces the act of Partition, as well as its moment of impact, in smaller profounder ways by concentrating on the penetrating transformation and anguish of one man in a condition of definitive solitude, plundered of whatever ideal he had retained in his troubled mind to keep himself alive.... [T]he Partition is the consequence of our country being no saner in the end than Toba Tek Singh and his many fellow lunatics. The world out there *is* the world in here.³³

Consistent with the logic of Partition, it has been ordained by the new states that the inmates of lunatic asylums should be exchanged according to their religion. It is at this point that Toba Tek Singh arrives at a resolution of his identity, which he clearly associates with the asylum itself. As the lunatics are being exchanged by the officials of the two countries, Toba Tek Singh stands his ground, refusing to be partitioned from his asylum and finally ends his life :

Just before dawn, Bishan Singh who had been standing inert let out a horrible scream. Officers from both sides ran forward and saw that the man who had always stood erect on his legs for the last 15 years was now lying on his face. On one side behind him stood together the lunatics of Hindustan [India] and on the other side across the road, lunatics of Pakistan. Between the no-man's land Toba Tek Singh lay stretched.³⁴

Rejecting the logic of Partition, Manto's Toba Tek Singh completes the inversion of madness and civilization. In the above readings, I tried to show how literature of that tumultuous period sheds light on the "other side" of Partition, elided in dominant nationalist discourse. In the following sections, I focus on another aspect that has been equally marginalized in the dominant political discourse--the predicament of religious

³² Ibid., 57

³³ Arjun Mahey, p. 150

minorities in the subcontinent, following the Partition. I first provide a brief sketch of the politics of religious identity in postcolonial India which then leads to a discussion of literary texts relating to the lives of the single largest minority in two countries affected by the Partition--Muslims in India and Hindus in Bangladesh.

Postcoloniality and the Politics of Religious Identity

It would be fair to expect that the two nations, India and Pakistan, coming into existence following the holocaust of Partition, would have learnt their lesson from history. The lesson, if learnt, would have *minimally* implied a commitment to the separation between religion and state; unfortunately that has not been the case anywhere in the subcontinent.³⁵ While Pakistan and later Bangladesh have instituted Islam as the state religion, in India the state's divergence from the secular principle of governance has been more subtle but steady.

In this section, I will first attempt to provide a brief overview of the dilution of the secular principle by the Congress party. The focus on a single political party is justified by the fact that the party spearheaded the independence movement and has the record of forming an elected government for over forty years since independence. The party thus has a strong hegemonic hold over the population including religious minorities. Its

³⁴ "Toba Tek Singh," p. 58

³⁵ There exists a robust and lively debate on the concept of secularism and its applicability in the subcontinent. See *Secularism and its Critics* ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) for a concise collection of essays on the issue. The following essays in the collection are of special relevance for our present discussion: Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration," Partha Chatterjee "Secularism and Tolerance," and Akeel Bilgrami, "Secularism, Nationalism and Modernity." Also see Veena Das, ed. *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots, Survivors in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990); Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Ludden, *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Achin Vanaik, *Communalism Contested: Religion Modernity and Secularization* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1997)

conduct is thus of special significance for appreciating the role of communal politics in the postcolonial period. I also offer a general profile of the ideology of the Hindu right, prominently manifested in the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP is at present in power and its popularity has been growing steadily in the past decade or so. With Congress' stance of opportunism and equivocation on secularism and the abandonment of the secular principle by the BJP, the nation state has at worst rejected the fight against communalism and at best is fighting a weak battle against it. This section finally segues into the next one where I offer readings from literary texts to show the ways in which the failed policy of secularism has affected the position of religious minorities within their own nation.

Unlike its neighbor Pakistan, India made a constitutional commitment to the principle of secularism. In spite of substantial pressure from both outside and within the National Congress to declare India as a Hindu state, the leadership of the party had the insight to make the connection between communal politics and state policy on religion. This insight, however, never really translated into a substantive commitment towards the building of a genuinely secular state. The previous section discusses how the dominant nationalist discourse has consistently eluded the reality of Partition as it allegedly undermines the idea of territorial unity--an integral part of nationalist ideology. In postcolonial India, the nation state, in action, if not in rhetoric, sought to establish another kind of unity--a cultural one--once again in the service of the nation.

Muslims, who stayed back in India and decided to entrust their hopes in the promises of a secular nation, did not receive their due. The creation of Pakistan created a sense of hostility towards Indian Muslims; it was believed that while this population was

beneficiary of India's liberal policies, their loyalty lay with Pakistan. Even though there was hardly any historical or political basis for such a prejudicial position, it was widely adopted by the nationalist leadership. Sardar Patel, India's first home minister and a leader who wielded tremendous influence within the Congress, had a clear stance on the country's minority population:

Mere declarations of loyalty to the Indian Union will not help them at this critical juncture. They must give practical proof of their declarations ... Those who are disloyal will have to go to Pakistan. Those who are still riding on two horses will have to quit Hindustan.³⁶

Similarly, Rajendra Prasad, the first President of independent India, expresses his strong misgivings about Indian Muslims. In his Introduction to a text on Gandhi, Prasad, after praising Gandhi for his efforts to bridge the gap between communities, laments the fact that the "problem has, however, not been solved ... We have still some 40 millions of Muslims in this country, spread all over the vast area of what is called India today."³⁷

It is not communal politics, in this reading, but the very existence of Muslims in India, that constitutes a "problem."

It is only to be expected that the position on the communal issue shared by stalwarts of the Congress like Patel and Prasad made its way into the general political culture of the party. Thus even as the party continues to offer secularism as one of its main planks, in actuality there has been a slow but steady movement towards communal politics. The election strategy followed by the party reflects this phenomenon quite well.

³⁶ *Speeches of Patel: For A United India*, p. 69

³⁷ Rajendra Prasad, "Introduction," *The Way to Communal Harmony*, ed. U. R. Rao (Ahmedabad, Navjivan, 1992) p. xii

An instance that serves to illustrate the point is the 1948 election campaign in Faizabad, a district in the North Indian State of Uttar Pradesh. The strategy successfully adopted by the Congress candidate in his contest against his socialist rival was to draw attention to his rival's lack of religiosity at the same time as highlighting his own Hindu faith. In the long run, the party's tolerance and indeed covert encouragement of similar electoral strategies distanced it away from its routine and hollow sloganeering on behalf of secular principles.

The assertion of a Hindu culture defined primarily in its opposition to the Muslim population is manifested in various ways. A controversy was generated against Urdu (the language used by North Indian Muslims) and over the years the language has been phased out of both the administration and also from public forums. In another such religio-cultural contest, Hindu fundamentalists have been successful in instituting a ban on cow slaughter in several North Indian states ruled by the Congress. It is not surprising that Congress leaders like Patel provided their seal of approval for a fundamental shift in the party's character by declaring their common cause with Hindu fundamentalist organizations like the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha.³⁸

Nehru was the one leader who could have stopped Congress's inexorable drift towards communal politics. His personal commitment to the principle of secular governance was unimpeachable and he had immense political resources at his command to provide a different ideological direction to the party. However, his frequent lamentations about his political colleagues notwithstanding, ultimately he chose to

³⁸ For a historical account of the communalization of the Congress party, see "Secularism: The Post-colonial Predicament" in Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 150-51

prioritize his party over his principles. He remained tolerant of extremely questionable practices by party members as in the case of the controversy surrounding the Babri Masjid, an incidence leading to disastrous consequence in the future.³⁹ Perhaps even more significantly, Nehru remained averse to forming a coalition against communalism with forces outside the Congress. He distanced himself from the socialists and even took the undemocratic step of dismissing the elected Communist government in the southern state of Kerala. Thus even with the most charismatic leader of the Congress, the party and its hold over the nation state ultimately trumped over the interests of the nation.

Congress's drift towards communal politics regardless of its secular rhetoric is significant in light of the fact that the party, as mentioned earlier, has had the strongest hegemonic hold over the nation state in the half century of its history. The communalization of the Congress has thus played a crucial role in the marginalization of the religious minorities. The irony is especially painful when it is taken into consideration that Congress, more than any other party, has historically been the beneficiary of the largest share of minority votes. The party leaders have always naturally been very conscious of the politics of the vote bank. It thus attempts to maintain its support base among Muslims by paying lip service to secularism and by following a policy of appeasement that has only worked against the interests of the Muslim community.

The Shah Bano case illustrates the dangerous logic of appeasement politics with regard to minorities. In 1985, Shah Bano, a Muslim divorcee was thrown out of her home by her wealthy lawyer husband after 41 years of marriage. It needs to be remarked here that India does not have a uniform civil code which means that "personal law" – laws

³⁹ Nehru had the opportunity to resolve the Babri mosque crisis in 1949 but he refrained from taking any definitive action. See *Legacy of a Divided Nation* p.153-4 for a discussion of the issue.

dealing with marriage, divorce, and inheritance – is handled by separate legal systems; thus there is a separate Islamic system that governs Muslim personal law. Consistent with Muslim personal law, Shah Bano was denied any share in the ownership of the house she had lived in and she was not allotted any maintenance payment either. She sued for regular maintenance payments under the uniform Criminal Procedure Code which forbids a man of adequate means to permit various close relatives (including an ex-wife) to remain in a state of “destitution and vagrancy.” Her case was fought at the Supreme Court in 1986 and the then Chief Justice opined that the Islamic system was very unfair to women and that the nation should secure a uniform civil code. He also argued that no Islamic text ruled out higher maintenance payments and ordered the requisite maintenance payments be made to Shah Bano by her ex-husband.

The ruling greatly unsettled the fundamentalist Muslim section of the population. They chose to read it as an attack on their culture, consequently the Islamic clergy and Muslim Personal Law Board organized widespread protest against the ruling, claiming it violated their free exercise of religion. It is the response of the then Congress government headed by Rajiv Gandhi that is instructive for our purposes. Faced with the wrath of the Muslim fundamentalist forces, which the Congress government believed was in a position to influence the whole community, the leaders once again compromised their principles for the immediate electoral interests of the party. The government of Rajiv Ghandi passed the Muslim Women’s (Protection after Divorce) Act of 1986, which deprived all and only Muslim women of the right of maintenance guaranteed under the Criminal Procedure Code, thus overriding the Supreme Court decision. It was a classic act of appeasement where the government argued that it was actually moved by the

interests of the minority community which was allegedly threatened by the “heavy handed” ruling of the court. In actuality, all that the government had done was placate the most reactionary elements of the community and close an avenue for internal reforms within the Muslim community that the ruling might well have opened.

The Congress’ poor record on secularism in some crucial ways paved the way for the ascendancy of the Hindu right. The Hindu fundamentalist force represented by the BJP (the political front) and the more virulent Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS (the cultural organizations) offer a markedly different position on nation and citizenship from that of the Congress. The Hindu fundamentalist forces, as the authors of an invaluable work on the history of the Hindu right observe, view the fabricated history of a continuous thousand year old struggle of Hindus against Muslims as the structuring principle of the Indian past.⁴⁰ Unlike the Congress that arrived at a definition of nationhood through the struggle against imperialism, for the Hindu right, the *other* of nationhood is not British imperialism but the pre-colonial history of “alien Muslim” rule. The national project for the BJP and its sister organization constitutes of, as Arvind Rajagopal observes, in the “revitalization ... [and] renewal of the distinctive energy and spirit” of the Hindu identity.⁴¹ The nation is imagined as a Hindu nation where religious minorities would necessarily occupy a subservient position.

A politics based on the religious identity of the majority population, as Nehru once observed, can always claim to be nationalistic while minority communalism is easily

⁴⁰ Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, Sambuddha Sen, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*. (New Delhi : Orient Longman, 1993) p. 2

⁴¹ Arvind Rajagopal, “Ram Janambhoomi, Consumer Identity and Image-based Politics,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 29.27 (1994) p. 1662

branded as separatist.⁴² In a country like India where 85 per cent of the population are Hindu, majority communalism also masquerades as "democracy." The problem with this logic, as pointed out by Basu et al., is that in a democracy no majority can be assumed to be permanent "based on a single, unchanging identity alone: a majority is constructed from issue to issue and can change from programme to programme."⁴³ The construction of an unchanging Hindu identity is based not only on the suppression of other religions but also of other identities like those based on class, gender, and region. The fact that both in its philosophy and its organizational structures, the Hindu rightist organizations are reminiscent of Nazism is not a coincidence. Golwalkar, one of the founding fathers of the contemporary Hindu nationalist movement, admiringly referred to Hitler:

German national pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up the purity of the nation and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races-the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn from and profit by.⁴⁴

The lesson from the treatment of Jews in Hitler's Germany is then applied to Indian Muslims. Muslims, it is first established, are always suspect as their loyalty lie neither with Hinduism nor with the Hindu nation:

They have developed a feeling of identification with the enemies of this land. They look to some foreign lands as their holy places ... it is not merely a case of change of faith, but a change even in national identity. What else is it if not treason, to join the camp of the enemy leaving the mother nation in the lurch?⁴⁵

⁴² *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, p. 11

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1

⁴⁴ Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, *We Or Our Nationhood Defined* (Nagpur City: Kale, 1947) p. 27

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28

The only condition under which Muslims and other minorities can then stay on in the country is to declare their subservience and loyalty towards the Hindu and the Hindu nation:

the non-Hindu people in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu nation i.e. they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ingratitude towards this land and its age-long traditions, but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead; in one word they must cease to be foreigners or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizen's rights.⁴⁶

The BJP along with its sister organizations have thus clearly articulated their agenda of redefining India as a Hindu nation where the position of religious minorities, especially Muslims, is reassigned as second class citizens.

The fundamentalist ideology of the Hindu right occupied a marginal space in the public sphere for about three decades after independence. However, since the eighties, owing to a variety of factors like the growing incompetence of secular political forces and the beginning of economic liberalization with its cultural fall-out,⁴⁷ the Hindu right has steadily developed its mass base and is at present one of the significant political forces in the country. The growing electoral success of the BJP represents a crucial socio-cultural phenomenon--the increasing communalization of the public sphere. The steady increase in atrocities against minority communities as also of riots that are carefully engineered to cause the maximum damage to minorities testify to this disturbing phenomenon. Indeed it is the complicity and acquiescence of the common person in communal practices that

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 52

⁴⁷ For an interesting argument on the cultural logic of economic liberalization, see Arvind Rajagopal, "Ram Janambhoomi, Consumer Identity and Image-based Politics."

stands as one of the most unsettling aspects of postcolonial Indian politics. In an insightful piece, written in the aftermath of the recent Gujarat riots, Sumanta Banerjee draws attention to this transformation in the psyche of what he calls the “silent majority”:

We have seen the faces of these members of the ‘silent majority’ again and again at the front of the riotous mobs, sometimes behind them not taking part but letting things go.... However much liberal and Left political and social scientists may try to explain every communal riot as a conspiracy by a bunch of politicians in league with religious fundamentalists, we cannot deny the fact that such riots take place on a soil fertile with religious prejudices and hatred. Administrative interventions like prompt police actions can indeed prevent riots, but never eradicate the canker of religious communalism that has remained embedded, and is fast spreading, among the ‘silent majority’.⁴⁸

The next section foregrounds the effect of this climate of “religious prejudices and hatred” on the everyday lives of minorities. As in the case of Partition, history and other social science discourses do provide valuable facts and figures and also intellectual analyses on the position of minorities in postcolonial India. They, however, remain silent on the agonizing sense of alienation laced with terror that gnaws away at the fabric of everyday existence of religious minorities. This project records the sense of estrangement generated by different identities, like linguistic, caste and gender, that question one’s sense of belonging in the national community. But I believe that in the subcontinent, it is religious identity, more than anything else, that has the power to render one an outsider in a nation allegedly one’s own. I turn once again to literary discourse that shed light on the lives of religious minorities and highlight their predicament in the postcolonial Indian subcontinent.

⁴⁸Sumanta Banerjee, “When the ‘Silent Majority’ Backs a Violent Minority,” *Economic and Political Weekly* March 30 (2002)
<http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2002&leaf=03&filename=4272&filetype=html>

Minorities in the Postcolonial Subcontinent

The destruction of the Babri mosque, a six hundred-year-old structure, by Hindu fundamentalists on December 6, 1992, exposed the deep roots of communal consciousness in civil society. This dark event that took place in Ayodhya, a city in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, serves as the backdrop to the literary texts from India and Bangladesh that I discuss in this section. The two Indian stories and the Bangladeshi novel highlight the sense of terror and isolation that has become an everyday reality in the lives of religious minorities in the wake of the Babri Masjid issue.

First, I briefly outline the history of the dispute that led to the destruction of the mosque. The Babri Masjid was built in the memory of the emperor Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur Badshah Ghazi, a minor prince of Ferghana (in modern-day Afghanistan) who founded the Mughal empire in India, which ruled until it was finally replaced by the British Raj after the general mutiny of 1857 failed. The mosque was built on the foundations of a razed Hindu temple, which is believed to mark the spot of the birth of Rama, the mythical hero of the *Ramayana*, one of the two major Hindu epics. In the popular imagination of the Hindu community, Rama has been the ideal hero-king for centuries.

The controversy has been about the site where the mosque was built; the Hindu forces claim it to be their place of worship. It needs to be pointed out that at no point before the middle of this century did the Babri Masjid figure as an emotive icon for Hindus. In the mid eighties, the BJP along with its other wings began an enormously successful mobilisation among Hindus all over North India to reclaim the site where the mosque was built and erect a temple on the spot. The campaign culminated in 1992 with thousands of rampaging activists tearing down the Babri mosque, quite literally, with

their bare hands. It was expectedly followed by unprecedented rioting across the subcontinent in which over seven thousand people lost their lives in India alone.⁴⁹ Today, for the BJP which rules India, the building of a temple on the site of the razed mosque, remains a part of their basic agenda. Meanwhile, the courts have not really addressed the issue of the responsibility for either the demolition of the mosque or the riots that followed the event. In fact some of the central players who instigated both the demolition and the riots hold key ministerial positions in the present BJP government.

If the above account serves to outline in broad strokes the history of the mosque dispute, the following readings from literary texts which have the mosque dispute as their backdrop, focus on the manifestation of communal consciousness in civil society.

Husainul Haq's story, "Consecrated Brick,"⁵⁰ is set in the period immediately following the demolition of the Babri mosque. The main protagonist of the story, Salamatullah, a Muslim, along with his family, resides in a Hindu neighborhood. The family, the reader is given to understand, has shared a relationship of general friendliness and goodwill with its neighbors. The mood in the community, however, starts changing in the aftermath of the mosque demolition. Salamatullah's neighbor, Shivpujan, has just returned from Ayodhya, after having volunteered his services in the destruction of the mosque. He has returned home with a stone that was a part of the demolished mosque. Upon Shivpujan's arrival, his residence becomes a site for celebratory gathering for fellow Hindus to congratulate him for his participation in the "great event" and for paying

⁴⁹ For figures on Muslim casualties in religious riots in the past fifty years, see <http://admin.muslimsonline.com/babri/imuslimstat.htm>

⁵⁰ Husainul Haq, "Consecrated Brick" in *Image and Representation : Stories of Muslim Lives in India* (New Delhi ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2000)

homage to the piece of stone. The neighborhood celebrations, however, spells impending doom in the home of Salamatullah.

The story revolves around the feelings of anxiety and terror faced by Salamatullah and his wife at a time when their neighbors are reveling in their mood of joyous triumph. In fact the juxtaposition of normalcy and its opposite--fear--emerges to be the central motif of the story. As Salamatullah returns home from work in what should have been another routine day, a deep sense of anxiety sets in as he discovers the reason for the gathering at his neighbor's place. The gloomy darkness of the evening caused by the power failure echoes Salamatullah's own mood:

Once again the power breakdown! The atmosphere within the house was eerie. Dim lantern lights flickered from nearby houses through the windows and ventilators. It seemed as if a snake slough was glinting in the darkness which had become more dense now. *The children were still playing in the street - Jai Kanya Ram Ki.*⁵¹
(emphasis added)

The chant "Jai Kanya Ram Ki" roughly translates as "Victory to Lord Rama." The slogan, a part of Hindu religious lexicon, could be innocuous enough given the culture's familiarity with it. The fact that the children were raising the slogan as they were playing, in a sense, could signify the slogan's harmless and familiar character. Salamatullah's wife prefers to highlight this harmless aspect of the slogan even as it is now also being chanted by the adults: "... they raise them (the slogans) to express their devotion." Salamatullah, however, refuses to share his wife's attempts at denial, he points out that "[i]t doesn't take long for devotion to turn into hatred."⁵² Indeed it does not and that is the lesson that

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 148

⁵² Ibid., p. 149

religious minorities of the subcontinent have been forced to repeatedly learn in the last half century.

Even though the violence of communal politics routinely expresses itself through targeted attacks against vulnerable populations it has an aspect that is perhaps even more sinister. The exclusivist politics of communal identity robs members of the minority community of something very fundamental--their right to a collective existence. Collective existence presumes the ability to take for granted the sense of normalcy and regularity in one's relationship with one's immediate community. Exclusive identity politics always has the potential to threaten this fundamental human right to collective life in perceived "others" and in the case of the politics of religious identity in the subcontinent, it is a potential that has been only too well realized. Salamatullah lies awake all night in his bed trying to reconcile himself with the religious slur used against him by one of his neighbors. At Shivpujan's house, he overhears someone referring to him as "sala mutla" (bastard muslim):

He remembered the phrase, 'Sala mutla' and felt as though someone had put live embers in his ears. Yes, these two words had been eating into him for the last seven hours. This had happened for the first time *and after fifteen years of living together*. Till the day before he was everybody's Salamat Bhai [Brother Salamat].⁵³
(emphasis added)

It is this frightening and sudden loss of all connection with people one has come to believe are part of one's community, that is a particularly ominous fallout of communal politics in the subcontinent. In a novel, that I discuss in the last chapter of this dissertation, the Indian English writer Amitav Ghosh, eloquently describes the nature of this fear of losing touch with all that is familiar, the fear experienced by Salamatullah:

⁵³ Ibid., p. 149

That particular fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe.... It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the street that one inhabits, can become suddenly and without warning as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world – not language, not food, not music – it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror.⁵⁴

For Salamatullah the fear and anxiety of isolation is further strengthened by a feeling of entrapment. He knows that even though he is victimized in his community for being a Muslim, ironically, his options for moving to a different neighborhood are severely limited, once again, because he is a member of a minority community. He has a limited income and rents in Muslim neighborhoods are very high as landlords fully exploit the minority community's anxieties for their own profit. Such are the routine travails in the everyday lives of minorities. In contrast, when the political situation becomes somewhat troublesome for Shivpujan, he is easily able to flee his house with his family. Salamatullah correctly ruminates that unlike him, Shivpujan was free to go anywhere in the country. Shivpujan, a devout Hindu, after all is the real citizen of the nation and thus in actuality enjoys what is a citizen's basic right--the freedom of movement. Salamatullah, however, by virtue of his religious identity, had been "defeated in a battle he had not fought"⁵⁵ and forced to become an outsider in his own land.

Jayanta De's story, "The Pendulum,"⁵⁶ once again locates communal politics not in the realm of opportunistic politics and rampaging mobs but right in the midst of community and familial life. The structural thread of the story is provided by a colonial

⁵⁴ Amitav Ghosh *The Shadow Lines* 1988; (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 204

⁵⁵ Jayanta De, "The Pendulum," in *Image and Representation : Stories of Muslim Lives in India*, p. 15

era table clock and the narrative revolves around the owner of the clock, an old man, and his son, the narrator. The old man deeply cherishes his clock and is very disappointed when it suddenly stops working. Endowed with the responsibility of getting the clock repaired, the son visits a watch-repair store. At the store, while in conversation with the watchmaker, he experiences an unreal and disconcerting moment. He feels that the watchmaker was taking a close look at him through his lenses and had diagnosed the rotten part within him. The "rotten part" is the son's sense of guilt about the fact that he accepts bribes in his job. As the story progresses, however, the reader realizes that accepting bribes is not the worst aspect of this man's character. His greater failing is revealed in his unquestioned reverence towards his morally bankrupt father.

The father, a character sketched with masterly strokes, is a recognizable and regular middle class man but one with a deplorable side to him. People visiting the house invariably admire the fancy table clock and then the old man proudly launches into the story of the clock, which according to the narrator, his son, is also a "tale of youth, of bravery, and of history."⁵⁷ The story, set in 1946, is always greatly admired by the son. The reader, as yet unaware of the actual story, understandably associates it with the anti-colonial struggle given that it is set in 1946, the year before independence and that it is supposedly a story of bravery and heroism. It is curious, however, that the object of veneration, the clock, around which the old man weaves his inspirational story, is clearly a British product. The contradiction unravels itself in light of the numerous other similar contradictions surrounding the old man.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 156

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 157

The man, believing himself to be representative of a bygone era of glory and courage, berates the younger generation for its lack of idealism. And yet when his son suffers from conscience pangs for accepting bribes, it is the old man who comes to his rescue: "[t]hen my father put his hands around my shoulder. He gave me moral courage. He did not call it a bribe. It was just a little extra earning."⁵⁸ There are other aspects of his character that sit at odds with his claims to higher moral authority. He, for instance, does not care for seeing the face of his son's wife first thing in the morning. He considers it inauspicious as the son and his wife have no children and he blames the wife for it. The old man's misogynistic streak and his hollow claims to moralism become understandable once the actual nature of the ideals espoused by him are revealed.

The ideals upheld by him always relate to racial pride and religious fundamentalism. The narrator, a blind follower of his father, appreciatively relates and echoes his father's views:

My father says, 'It is only now that the people of India are beginning to awaken. Babri was a big hurdle. That is demolished. Now the Hindus will advance rapidly. But there is a lot to be done still.'

I know this is a signal for Hindu Renaissance. One day the Hindus will march all over the world. Fly their own flag. It has been written by Nostradamus.

It does not come as a surprise that the father's tale of heroism surrounding the clock actually has no connection with the anti-colonial struggle. In fact the story, repeatedly narrated by the old man and always admired by his son, is of Hindus gaining the upper hand over Muslims in a deadly religious riot. The old man's bigotry, his misogyny and his lack of integrity blend seamlessly into one another.⁵⁹

In the climactic moments of the narrative, between the old man's dogmatism and his son's spineless submission to his father's views, they push a young Muslim boy

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 158

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 160

towards religious fundamentalism. The clock is repaired at a store owned by an old friend of the narrator who happens to be a Muslim and later the friend's son visits the narrator's place to return the clock. The old man is unaware of the fact that their visitor is a Muslim and when he shares a moment alone with the visitor, he launches into his tale of racial pride. As the narrator joins his father and the visitor, he realizes to his chagrin that his father had unwittingly made the Muslim boy an audience to his tale of Hindu pride:

My father's story was at its peak '...so we also decided that for every Hindu killed we shall kill ten Muslims. A fire was raging within us ...

I stole a glance at Samu's boy. His large eyes were about to bulge out. His half-open lips were absolutely dry. I could see he was now breathing only through his mouth. I called out to father in a low voice.

Father was somewhat brief today but still I knew what he was going to say. The boy was staring hard at him. I was restless with anxiety. Father must be stopped ... I tried to raise my voice and call out to him ... Father roared, 'Bande Mataram' [Hail Motherland] and continued- 'Many Hindus were being killed at Fearce Lane and Sagar Dutta Lane. So it was decided that for every Hindu dead there must be ten Muslim corpses. So on one side we rescued the Hindus and on the other sought vengeance for the killing of Hindus. Calcutta was heaped up with corpses ...'

A trickle of sweat was winding its way down the boy's face.... [H]e was clenching his fists. I had to stop father. I shouted at the top of my voice.

Father's face was also red. Full of rage, he outshouted me. 'You are asking your father to stop. Will you just remain silent? You cowards, eunuchs!'

My heart sank. It was the coward and the eunuch within me.

'What have you done for your motherland? What has your generation sacrificed? Sons of cowards, a bunch of eunuchs.'

I hit the air and shouted 'We have demolished the Babri Masjid...What more do you want from us?'

'Yes that is the only achievement of your generation. But we had expected much more from you.'

I spoke with a voice deep from within my guts. 'We shall make India a Hindu state.'⁶⁰

This exchange between a bigoted father and son fuels the Muslim boy's sense of insecurity and rage to such an extent that it forces him to turn towards Islamic fundamentalism.

Interestingly, this was not the first time that the boy had encountered religious fundamentalism. He had earlier traveled to Bombay in pursuit of a job but the climate of staunch Hindu fundamentalism in that city had forced him to return home to Calcutta. That experience, though painful, had not marked any transformation in his own character. It is only when he witnesses the dark strength of majority communalism so close to home, among family friends, that he is himself driven into the arms of another brand of fundamentalism.

In highlighting the nature of the father and son's world-view, De's story insightfully captures the cultivation of religious fundamentalism in civil society by locating it within a regular and recognizable middle class family. Even more significantly, the story by focusing on the transformation of the Muslim boy, sheds light on the phenomenon of minority communalism. The fundamentalism of the majority, as the reading of the next text shows in more intricate detail, invariably becomes the breeding ground for the emergence of fundamentalist politics by the insecure minority.

The demolition of the Babri mosque was not only followed by violent riots and persecution of minorities all over India, it had the same effect in the neighboring Muslim-majority state of Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin's short novel *Shame*, written in the immediate aftermath of the demolition of the mosque, presents a

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 166-7

critical history of Bangladesh while focusing on the persecution of a Hindu family in Dacca in the riots following the mosque demolition. Sharply critical of her country's Islamic fundamentalist policies and its implications for minorities and women, she called her novel "a document of our collective defeat."⁶¹ The novel shot Nasrin into international limelight as it was immediately banned in Bangladesh and Muslim clerics issued a *fatwa* against her, declaring a cash award for her death. Nasrin had to flee the country and take refuge in Sweden where she now lives. In an interview with Britain's *Independent* newspaper, when her plight was compared to that of the writer Salman Rushdie, Nasrin commented wryly: "[m]y situation is like Rushdie's would have been if he had been living in Iran."⁶²

The fundamental target of the novel's critique--the role of religion in politics--primarily derives its substance from the history of the subcontinent. Pakistan, when originally formed, consisted of two geographically non-contiguous areas, the Muslim-majority districts of Western British India and the Muslim dominated Eastern part of Bengal. This arrangement resulted in a bifurcated Muslim nation separated by more than a thousand miles of Indian territory. Geography was not the only factor that divided the two wings of Pakistan; there were also differences in language, culture and history. It was believed, however, by the proponents of two-nation theory that the commonality of religion would override all other differences. They were proved wrong.

The commonality of religion, notwithstanding, West Pakistan followed a policy closely akin to that of colonial domination in its economic and social policies towards its

⁶¹ Taslima Nasrin, *Shame* (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 1994) p. 17

⁶² See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/185683.stm

Eastern wing. This resulted in a fierce battle for independence waged by East Pakistan and the formation of the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971. In her novel, Nasrin draws attention to this history to make her point about religion and nation formation:

An independence that was earned at the cost of three million Bengali lives proved that religion could not be the basis for national identity. Language, culture and history on the other hand were able to create the foundation on which to build a sense of nationality.⁶³

The formation of Bangladesh repudiates the very basis of Partition and clearly demonstrates the folly of mixing religion and politics. This lesson, however, was not learnt by Bangladesh.

Nasrin's work shows that communal politics still remains a strong force even within a nation that disclaimed the politics of religious identity and was formed on the basis of a common language, culture and history. The fairly large Hindu minority in the country has had to repeatedly bear the brunt of religious persecution. Bangladesh formally modified its constitution in 1978 and declared Islam to be the state religion. The novel focuses on the plight of one Hindu family during the riots following the demolition of the Babri mosque in India. The Dutta household comprises of Sudhamoy, a former freedom fighter for Bangladeshi independence, his wife Kironmoyee and their two children Suranjan and Maya who have grown up in independent Bangladesh. The family members, having been a part of the country's history since its inception, value their national identity. The novel traces how their confidence in their identity as Bangladeshis, is utterly shaken if not shattered, in the face of communal persecution by their fellow country people for the strange reason that a fanatical act had been committed by Hindu fundamentalists in a neighboring country.

⁶³ *Shame* p. 8

The terror generated by the riots does not really affect Sudhamoy. He finds ways of consoling rather deluding himself. He would read newspaper reports of peace marches or of routine government pronouncements declaring the need for communal amity and believe that all is basically well. It is not escapism, however, that stops him from making a more realistic assessment of the situation. It is his patriotism, his deep faith in the humanistic ideals that he had fought for during the independence movement that does not allow him to even consider the possibility that Bangladesh was no longer the country of his ideals. After all, it was in the Pakistani regime that he had been kidnapped by the occupying army for being a Hindu and brutally tortured for days. Following that, he and his wife had lived in a village for seven years under disguised Muslim names.

In that whole period, Sudhamoy had believed that the Pakistani government was the colonizer and had fervently supported the Bangladeshi war of independence. In the face of mass Hindu exodus to India, which included his close friends, he had rejected to even consider that option for himself: "... it all came down to the same old question: Was he afraid of being a Hindu, or of being an insecure, fearful human in his own home?"⁶⁴ Independent Bangladesh became for him the land of his dreams and ideals where people of divergent faith could peacefully coexist. And this is not a belief that could be easily shattered for Sudhamoy.

Unlike her idealistic father, Maya, we are told, "knew how to make compromises and survive."⁶⁵ She tries to persuade her brother to make arrangements for the family to move into one of their Muslim friends' place for reasons of safety till the riots are over.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 18

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 53

Realizing that neither her brother nor her parents are prepared to pay much heed to her request, she decides to move out herself and take refuge at her Muslim friend's place. Once she leaves the house, however, Maya is kidnapped by a gang of Muslim fanatics and her whereabouts remain unknown till the end. Making compromises with fundamentalist politics, Nasrin seems to say, need not necessarily ensure survival.

For Maya's brother, Suranjan, the choice is not between being idealistic or making compromises. Even though he has always accepted the fact that he is a Hindu, religion has never been a central component of his own sense of identity. It is his life in Bangladesh surrounded by peers and friends who are almost all Muslims, his parents who have always tried to inculcate a faith in humanism in their children, his own belief in and activism for socialistic ideals that defines his self-identity. In the atmosphere of calculated persecution of Hindus, it is Suranjan's own sense of identity that becomes a casualty. The novel traces his painful progress towards religious fundamentalism.

As the riots begin, Suranjan soon realizes that he is not in a position to follow his basic inclinations. Unlike his friends, he is not able to join gatherings to discuss political events nor can he be part of a peace rally. As a Hindu, he is a suspect wherever he goes which in turn is a cruel reminder that he is not safe anywhere. In a repetition of the same ironic phenomenon whereby a Muslim boy is pushed towards fundamentalism by Hindu bigots in De's story, Suranjan finds that because his whole identity is reduced to being just a Hindu in a Muslim country, he is himself forced to take refuge in his religious identity: "Yes, I used to call myself a human being, and I believed in humanism. But these Muslims did not let me stay human. They made me a Hindu."⁶⁶ The novel

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 163

insightfully explores the manner in which the exclusivist politics of religious identity not only demonizes members of “other” religions but it also undermines multiple identities like that of community, gender, beliefs or nationality to prioritize only that of religion.

Distraught at the loss of his sister and unable to find any avenue to vent his grief and frustration, Suranjan is at the same time forced to listen to inane if not hypocritical government pronouncements about the state’s attempts to contain the riots. The alienation generating from his religious identity questions his sense of belonging in the nation:

“‘[b]loody bastards...bloody swine...that’s Bangladesh for me.’”⁶⁷ He pleads with his father that they should leave the country and move to India:

‘However much we call ourselves athiests, however much we call ourselves humanists, those people out there will call us Hindus. They’ll call us bastards. The more we love this country, the more we think of it as our own, the more we’ll be forced into a corner. The more we love the people of this country, the more they’ll isolate us. We cannot trust them, Baba ... Sooner or later all of us will be shoved under a bridge to die. Baba, please let’s go ... let’s go...’⁶⁸

In a sad finale to the novel, the principled Sudhamoy who had idealized Bangladesh as the land of his dreams, is forced to see the logic in his son’s argument and is prepared to leave the country. The postcolonial literature of the subcontinent registers the frightening sense of isolation that emerges from the loss of a sense of connection with one’s immediate community. Sudhamoy’s decision to leave his country shows that if religious minorities cannot even take for granted their membership in the community of their everyday life, it is certainly not possible for them to assert their citizenship in the “imagined community” of the nation.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 179

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 213

CHAPTER 4

"I DON'T KNOW COUNTRY": THE NATION AND ITS DISPOSSESSED

In Mahashweta Devi's novella, *Douloti the Bountiful*,¹ an upper-caste business man wishes to know the age of Douloti, the daughter of Ganori, a low-caste bonded laborer. Ganori replies: "when there was independence for you and the bosses, the boss fed everyone puffed bread and stuffed bread, had a big show, went to town. Douloti was born the year after that."² The "independence" that Ganori is referring to is India's independence from colonial rule and the formation of a free nation. Ganori's complete alienation from the central event of the nation's history, and thus from the nation itself, is typical of his caste and class. In this chapter I offer readings of two of Devi's novellas, *Douloti the Bountiful* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*, that help explore both the reasons and the nature of the exclusion and alienation of an overwhelmingly large group of the population from what is supposed to be their own nation. In Devi's writings the poignant depiction of the dispossessed groups' everyday experiences of deprivation and ideologies of survival is always firmly situated in the context of the meta-narrative of nationalism. Before engaging with Devi's literary works, however, it is imperative to first briefly explore the historical contours of the relationship between Indian nationalism and the nation's poor.

¹ Mahashweta Devi, *Douloti the Bountiful*. Trans., Comp. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Imaginary Maps: Three stories by Mahashweta Devi*. (New York: Routledge, 1995).

² Ibid., p. 44.

Gandhi vs. Ambedkar

In a recent book, Arun Shourie, an Indian journalist and a politician, depicts B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), as an anti-nationalist and a sycophant of the British rule.³ Ambedkar, the central leader of the oppressed castes, was also the prime architect of the Indian constitution and free India's first law minister. Yet, Shourie's appraisal of Ambedkar is not completely a false one. Ambedkar was not particularly interested in the Indian independence movement and indeed on more than one occasion, he actually connived with the British. That said, however, Shourie's basic thesis that Ambedkar was a self-serving politician and detrimental to the nationalist movement remains prejudicial and false. To admit to both the truth in most of Shourie's description of Ambedkar's political career and at the same time to reject his partisan characterization of the leader is to appreciate the checkered nature of Indian nationalism.

Ambedkar belonged to the so-called untouchable caste of Hinduism. Within the caste system that rigidly determines people's economic and social life based on their birth, the untouchable caste is the lowest of the low. The members of the caste are typically sweepers, cleaners, nightsoil collectors, and leather tanners. For the upper castes, the "lowly" nature of such professions renders the caste so unclean that they are viewed as pollutants. It is to avoid such pollution that any interaction with the members of this low caste might generate that they are declared to be untouchables. The stigma of untouchability is not only an economic burden but permeates every imaginable aspect of social and cultural life as well. Inter-marriage and even inter-dining remain taboo with the members of this caste, they are barred from general facilities like drawing water from

³ Arun Shourie, *Worshipping False Gods : Ambedkar, And The Facts Which Have Been Erased*. (New Delhi : HarperCollins, 2001).

public wells and from access to cultural/religious sites like temples. One of the more significant restrictions for the caste members is the denial of educational opportunities for their children. The twin reality of the near impossibility for upward mobility combined with a lifetime of hardship and humiliation is the designated fate for this caste.

Ambedkar's journey from a childhood in a poverty-stricken, untouchable household to receiving a doctoral degree from Columbia University and a law degree from the London School of Economics is a fascinating story that has been repeatedly told.⁴ He returned to India after completing his education and immersed himself for the rest of his life in organizing a movement by the low castes for fairness and justice. For the most part, Ambedkar's political career coincided with the nationalist movement for independence. Even though he often worked in close association with the nationalist leaders, it would not be inapt to say that the political independence of the country was not a cause that moved him. While it is not hard to condemn Ambedkar for his political stance, I would argue that it is imperative that we examine the reasons for his lack of interest in the struggle against colonialism.

Ambedkar's own struggle--against the systemic social and economic oppression of the lower castes--was not causally related to colonial rule. Untouchability was not a product of the British rule; it was an intrinsic part of the caste system and Hinduism. Ambedkar would not agree that his struggle for justice on behalf of his people would be more fruitful in free India. And there was good reason for his way of thinking which brings us to the second reason for his disinterest in the nationalist movement. The central

⁴ See for instance, G. Ganni Raju, *The Life of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar*. (Hyderabad : Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Society, 1979); Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar : Life and Mission*. (Bombay : Popular Prakashan, 1971).

organization that spearheaded the movement against colonialism and for nationhood was the Indian National Congress. The leadership and the cadre of the Congress were not only overwhelmingly dominated by the upper castes but the party also demonstrated benign disinterest at best and active hostility at worst towards the plight of the lower castes. Mahatma Gandhi did take up the cause of untouchables but that was only after the Congress was forced to appreciate the competition for mass base signaled by the increasing popularity of Ambedkar's politics. Ambedkar's scant regard for the nationalist movement, justifiable or not, is certainly something that had its explanation.

The appreciation of Ambedkar's differences with the nationalist leadership requires a brief overview of Mahatma Gandhi's position on issues of caste and class. The reason I choose to focus on Gandhi of all the leaders of the movement are several. The chasm between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the issue of untouchability is an interesting and instructive chapter in modern Indian history.⁵ It is Gandhi rather than Ambedkar who has been portrayed as the real crusader against untouchability in dominant nationalist historiography. That is not surprising when Gandhi's centrality to the nationalist movement and Ambedkar's opposition is taken under consideration. Gandhi's approach to issues of class and caste has had a formative and lasting influence on the ideology of the nation state. The political divide between the two personalities--Gandhi, the nationalist icon and Ambedkar, the "anti-nationalist"--is thus of special significance to the present project that attempts to evaluate the *discontents* of the nation.

It needs to be observed at the outset that Gandhi was the one leader in Congress who popularized the movement against caste discrimination. The history of the political

⁵ See A. K. Vakil, *Gandhi-Ambedkar Dispute* (New Delhi : Ashish Publishing House, 1991).

twists and turns of his involvement with the movement is beyond the scope of the present paper. Instead we take a brief look at his ideological stance on the social reality first of caste, then of class, that guided his politics. In the early twenties Gandhi devoted himself to the removal of untouchability which he believed to be morally inexcusable. While unequivocally condemning the practice of untouchability, Gandhi remained a staunch defender of the caste system that generates the practice. He believed that the caste system needed some reforms but that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with it. In an article in a Gujarati Journal, *Nava Jivan*, Gandhi fully elaborated on his views on caste, most of the article was later translated in English by Ambedkar for one of his own works.

Gandhi defends Caste by glorifying its core characteristics. If the economic and social compartmentalization of groups based on birth is the inegalitarian core of the system, Gandhi finds reason to celebrate precisely such an organization of society. "Different castes are like different sections of military division," Gandhi opines, "each division is working for the good of the whole." He further observes, without any touch of irony, that "a community which can create the caste system must be said to possess unique power of organization." The binding restriction that the system places on the individual's choice of occupation and its sinister implications for the lower castes is again something that Gandhi applauds: "To destroy caste system and adopt Western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system. Hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder."⁶

⁶ Qtd in B. R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*. (Bombay: C. Murphy, 1945) p. 286-87.

The question arises as to how Gandhi combines his defense of Caste with his condemnation of untouchability. He does this by reducing the definition of untouchability to a mere *practice* and refusing to question the content and origin of the practice. For Gandhi the belief that contact with the members of a low caste would contaminate the upper castes is morally questionable, the division of castes is not. In an astute move Gandhi glorifies the lower castes by using the religious rhetoric of Hinduism and the caste system itself:

The Shudra [the lowest wrung in the caste system] who only serves (the higher caste) as a matter of religious duty, and who will never own any property, who indeed has not even the ambition to own anything, is deserving of thousand obeisances...The very Gods will shower down flowers on him.⁷

In consistence with this approach of justification of socioeconomic stratification along with an attitude of inclusiveness towards the worst victims of the systems, Gandhi renamed the untouchables as *Harijans*, literally--the children of God. For most of his life Gandhi remained opposed to intermarriage and even interdining between members of the upper castes and the supposed "children of God." His bewildering justification for such discriminatory practices deserve to be quoted:

I believe that interdining or intermarriage are not necessary for promoting national unity. That dining together creates friendship is contrary to experience. If this was true there would have been no war in Europe... Taking food is as dirty an act as answering the call of nature. The only difference is that after answering call of nature we get peace while after eating food we get discomfort. Just as we perform the act of answering the call of nature in seclusion so also the act of taking food must also be done in seclusion. In India children of brothers do not intermarry. Do they cease to love because they do not intermarry ? Among the Vaishnavas [a sect of Hinduism] many women are so orthodox that they will not eat with the members of the family nor will they drink water from a common water pot. Have they no

⁷ Ibid., p.303

love ? The Caste system cannot be said to be bad because it does not allow inter-dining or intermarriage between different Castes.⁸

Gandhi's hollow rhetoric of inclusiveness is always underlined by his committed defense of the most egregious aspects of the caste system. He, for instance, observes that a low caste person need not be denied access to education; in fact caste should not at all be a factor in pursuing any form of learning and interest. The sacrosanct principle of following one's hereditary occupation, however, should be divorced from education, merit and interest. "What the *Varna* [caste] system enjoins," according to this novel interpretation, "is that a Shudra should not make learning a way of living... Similarly a Brahmin may learn the art of war or trade. But he must not make them a way of earning his living."⁹ With some real and mostly rhetorical concessions made to the needs and demands of the lower castes, Gandhi is always careful to leave the basic structure of Caste intact. Ambedkar, all too aware of the fundamental injustices of the system in the name of religion, observes¹⁰:

What hope can Gandhism offer to the Untouchables ? To the Untouchables Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of karma and the senseless law of status by birth are to the Untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against the Untouchables. These very instruments which have mutilated, blasted and blighted the life of the Untouchables are to be found intact and untarnished in the bosom of Gandhism.¹¹

⁸ Ibid., p. 287

⁹ Ibid., p. 288

¹⁰ Apart from *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, another work that sheds light on Ambedkar's views on Gandhism is B. R. Ambedkar, *Gandhi and Gandhism* (Punjab: Bheem Patrika Publications, 1970).

¹¹ *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, p. 307-8.

Gandhi's unequivocal traditionalism, it may be argued, is an intrinsic aspect of a radical nationalism. He refuses to imagine the nation, as Ashis Nandy suggests, within the framework of post-enlightenment thought or "the clenched-teeth European version of nationalism."¹² Instead he imagines a national community based on traditional Indian social structures. The argument, however, breaks down when Gandhi's approach to capital is taken under consideration. While the justification of Caste may be explained as part of a nativist nationalism, the same explanation can hardly hold for defense of the interests of capital. Yet, like his position on caste which failed to challenge upper-caste oppression, Gandhi's stance on capital-labor conflicts almost consistently empowered the capitalist class. In articles in *Harijan*, a periodical published by him, Gandhi's discussion of various workers strikes in 1946 reflect a position that at best equivocates on the question of whether workers have the right to strike, at worst clearly discourages independent class-action and is always suffused with empty moralism.¹³

In 1921, speaking in the context of a laborers' strike in Bombay, Gandhi expresses his anxiety about the laboring class coming into its own by a realization of its power:

In the struggle between capital and labour, it may be generally said that more often than not the capitalists are in the wrong box. But when labour comes fully to realise its strength, I know it can become more tyrannical than capital. The millowners will have to work on the terms dictated by labour, if the latter could command intelligence of the former. It is clear, however, that labour will never attain to that intelligence. If it does; labour will cease to be labour and become itself the master. The capitalists do not fight on the strength of money alone. They do possess intelligence and tact.

¹² Ashis Nandy, "The Illegitimacy of Nationalism," *Return From Exile* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.84.

¹³ See M. K. Gandhi, "Strikes." *Harijan* 11 Aug. 1946; M. K. Gandhi, "Some Labour Questions." *Harijan* 17 Feb. 1946; M. K. Gandhi, "Capitalism and Strikes." *Harijan* 31 Mar. 1946; M. K. Gandhi, "Sweeper's Strike." *Harijan* 21 Apr. 1946.

"The question before us is this: When the labourers, remaining what they are, develop a certain consciousness, what should be their course?" It would be suicidal 'if the labourers rely upon their numbers or brute-force, i.e., violence. By so doing, they will do harm to industries in the country.'¹⁴

As in every other instance, Gandhi manages to appeal to Indian history, as if it were its own justification: "India's history is not one of strained relations between capital and labour."¹⁵ The assumption is of course that both capital and labor are *equal beneficiaries* of "unstrained relations." If strikes are to be at all support-worthy, in Gandhi's view, then they should be motivated not so much by the demands of the workers but by a disinterested position against injustice – what he calls "moral strike." In an interesting logical twist he believes that the case for *moral* strike is strengthened because of the *pragmatic* reason that strikes are often futile as workers are always replaceable. A worker striking for "moral" reasons of course does not care for results. In any case, even in a "moral" strike, the central nationalist leader makes it clear, the strikers should expect no political support:

A wise man, therefore, will not strike for increase of wages or other comforts, if he feels that he can be easily replaced. But a philanthropic or patriotic man will strike in spite of supply being greater than the demand, when he feels for and wishes to associate himself with his neighbour's distress. Needless to say, there is no room in a civil strike of the nature described by me for violence in the shape of intimidation, incendiarism or otherwise.... Judged by the tests suggested by me, it is clear that friends of the strikers could never have advised them to apply for or receive Congress or any other public funds for their support. The value of the strikers' sympathy was diminished to the extent, that they received or accepted financial aid. The merit of a sympathetic strike lies in the inconvenience and the loss suffered by the sympathisers.¹⁶

¹⁴ M. K. Gandhi, *Nava Jivan* 8 June, 1921.

¹⁵ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India* 23 Feb, 1922.

¹⁶ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 11 Aug, 1921.

Gandhi is of course nothing if not creative with the moral solutions that he propounds for socioeconomic conflicts. Confronted with the problematic of justifying gross inequity of wealth, Gandhi declares that the rich should consider themselves *trustees* of the wealth of the poor. Such trusteeship would not be legally enforceable in any way but is to remain a spiritual obligation. He accepts the impracticality of his solution but insists on it regardless:

Those who own money now are asked to behave like trustees holding their riches on behalf of the poor. You may say that trusteeship is a legal fiction.... Absolute trusteeship is an abstraction like Euclid's definition of a point, and is equally unattainable. But if we strive for it, we shall be able to go further in realizing a state of equality on earth than by any other method.¹⁷

Gandhi's approach to socioeconomic inequity, be it in the form of caste or class, is consistent with his dual tactic of appeasement of the oppressed along with a defense of the status-quo. The appeasement of the marginalized millions was a political necessity for the success of a nationalist movement in a country where the overwhelming majority is indigent peasants and workers. The support to the rule of the upper class/caste is explained by the fact that the Congress itself was a party of the upper caste, propertied classes, and also the party was dependent on the financial support of big landlords and mill-owners. Gandhi's position on a movement by poor farmers against their landlord is instructive in this context:

The Kisan [peasants] movement has received an impetus from Non-co-operation [a movement lead by the Congress] but it is anterior to and independent of it. Whilst we will not hesitate to advise the Kisans when the moment comes, to suspend payment of taxes to Government, it is not contemplated that at any stage of Non-cooperation we would seek to deprive the Zamindars [landlords] of their rent. The Kisan movement must be confined to the improvement of status of the Kisans and the betterment of the relations between the Zamindars and them. The Kisans must

¹⁷ Interview with Nirmal Bose 9 Nov. 1934 in Mahatma Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. vol. 59, p 318.

be advised scrupulously to abide by the terms of their agreement with the Zamindars, whether such is written or inferred from custom. Where a custom or even a written contract is bad, they may not try to uproot it by violence or without previous reference to the Zamindars.¹⁸

The indigent peasantry, according to Gandhi, should await the instructions of the Congress for withholding taxes to the British government. But under no circumstances should the peasantry contemplate withholding taxes to the local ruling class - the *zamindars*. No matter how exploitative they are, the peasants are not to rebel against the authority of the landlords. It is a classic instance that reveals the dominant character of the nationalist leadership. The primary goal of the leadership was clearly the transfer of power from the British to the national elite rather than any real solidarity with the interests of the poor masses.

In his work, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Partha Chatterjee characterizes "the entire story of the Gandhian intervention in India's nationalist politics as the ... 'passive revolution of capital' in India."¹⁹ The revolution for capital is successfully achieved by the combination of Gandhi's idealistic positions that appeased the subaltern classes and his *realpolitik* that almost unfailingly accommodated the interests of the ruling classes. It is an achievement of paramount significance in its ability to mobilize the masses in the interest of a national revolution that switched the political and economic rule of the country from a colonial power to a native bourgeoisie. Gandhian ideology, Chatterjee observes:

...is an ideology conceived as an intervention in the elite-nationalist discourse of the time and was formed and shaped by the experiences of a specifically national

¹⁸ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 18 May, 1921

¹⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 113.

movement. It is only by looking at it in that historical context that it becomes possible to understand the unique achievement of Gandhism: its ability to open up the possibility for achieving perhaps the most important task for a successful national revolution in a country like India, viz., the political appropriation of the subaltern classes by a bourgeoisie aspiring for hegemony in the new nation-state.²⁰

The nature of Ambedkar's different intervention in the nationalist movement needs to be viewed in the context of the dominant character of the nationalist movement represented by Gandhian politics. Ambedkar's indifference to the nationalist movement, it needs to be argued, is questionable only if the elitist nature of the movement itself is not questioned. The movement could never meaningfully make space for Ambedkar's struggle against the marginalization of the lower castes. Any national struggle, if it is to represent the whole nation, cannot be limited to wresting power from foreign rule. It also needs to evolve as a struggle that is substantively rather than only rhetorically representative of the needs and interests of all its people. Assessing the contribution of Ambedkar, in this larger sense of a nationalist movement, S. M. Gaikwad observes:

It is not generally realised that a nationalist struggle for freedom has an internal aspect too, and that aspect is really very important. Ambedkar's struggle constituted a part of this internal struggle of a nation in the making against its own historical past.... The complex process of nation-building involved of necessity, many apparently divergent and conflicting currents which were in the final analysis helping to secure the ultimate goal of 'freedom' - freedom from both external and internal oppression and enslavement.²¹

A contrastive evaluation of Gandhi and Ambedkar's relation to the nationalist movement facilitates a richer understanding of the very concepts of nation and nationalism. Nation, in the modern period, is closely associated with the ideal of a consensual regime where all people are in some way a part of the political process. In

²⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

²¹ S. M. Gaikwad, "Ambedkar and Indian Nationalism" *Economic and Political Weekly* Mar. 7 (1998): 517.

actuality, nations often become hostage to powerful interests that need not be representative of the people. The rhetoric of democracy, however, is often maintained by the ruling elite as a way of legitimizing its rule. A significant part of Ambedkar's crucial role in the Indian nationalist movement has been to expose the gap between rhetoric and reality in the actions of its leadership.

In postcolonial India, the elitist political and ideological legacy of the Congress, has flourished quite well. The interests of the political and economic elite continues to determine the basic tenor of national policies. At the same time the exclusive character of the state remains concealed under the ideological integument of nationalism. And as in the case of Ambedkar, critics of the nation-state often run the risk of being labeled anti-nationalist. In such an atmosphere that tends to scuttle all criticism, the literature of writers like Mahashweta Devi performs a very crucial function. By foregrounding the tension between nationalist rhetoric and national reality, Devi's fiction opens the space for a meaningful auto-critique of the nation and in the process enriches the conceptualization of nationhood and democracy. ✓

Douloti and the Nation's Outcasts

Mahashweta Devi is a well acclaimed writer and activist in contemporary India and has been awarded the highest literary awards in India and other Asian countries for her work. In the last forty years she has published twenty collections of short stories and nearly a hundred novels apart from her prolific work as a journalist. In the sixties and seventies she wrote about the Naxalite movement, a short-lived but very influential leftist militant movement, threatening enough to have been systematically and ruthlessly crushed by the state. In a 1983 interview, Devi points to this movement as the first major

event that she felt "an urge and an obligation to document."²² Since then she has been engaged as a writer and an activist with various rural marginalized groups, in particular with the tribal population of the country.

As an activist Devi is closely associated with the everyday lives of various subaltern groups and is doing remarkable work in organizing them in their demands for basic human rights. In both her journalistic and literary writings, Devi has exposed the stupendous exploitation of these people and their daily lives of misery and squalor. She describes the tribal population of the country, for instance, as the "suffering spectators of the India that is traveling towards the twenty-first century."²³ The experiences of the tribal population in the postcolonial state is very similar to the low castes in both their systematized exploitation by the powerful national elite and in their alienation from the nation-state.

I now offer readings of two novellas by Devi, *Douloti the Bountiful* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*, both translated and compiled by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her collection, *Imaginary Maps*. While *Douloti* focuses on the system of bonded labor that basically effects the low-caste population, *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha* charts the experiences of the aboriginal population of the country. These literary pieces play out the tensions implicit in the Gandhi-Ambedkar saga between nation and its discontents. Henry Schwarz is right in observing that one of the most "instructive aspects" of Devi's work is the absence of discussions of colonization as well as the Independence movement, instead she chooses to focus on "class, gender and

²² Samik Bandyopadhyay, "Introduction." *Five Plays*. (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1986) p. viii.

²³ "The Author in Conversation," *Imaginary Maps* p. xi.

ethnic difference in ways that go far beyond the ideology of the state in order to question the official story of national integration following independence.”²⁴ Like Ambedkar, Devi repudiates the official versions of decolonization and nationalism; but unlike the leader of the untouchables, Devi is never ambiguous about the validity and significance of nationhood. Instead she very consciously reinscribes the nation with a subaltern perspective and thereby offers an alternative and richer conceptualization of nationhood.

Even though the subaltern characters of *Douloti* remain unaware of the concept of India--the nation-state, yet in the concluding lines of the novella, the author makes a striking gesture to reclaim the nation on behalf of her characters. In the concluding scene of the novella, Mohan Srivastava, a Gandhian schoolteacher is about to hoist the Indian flag on the occasion of the anniversary of the country's independence. He is to raise the flag on the yard where a map of India has been drawn on the ground by cutting the outline and pouring liquid chalk into it. Unfortunately, this is the picture that awaits Mohan:

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labor spread-eagled, Kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs.

Today, on the fifteenth of August [Indian Independence day], Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India.²⁵

Devi arrives at this equation between Douloti's corpse and the Indian nation after a detailed narrative of the ominous underbelly of the “modern” postcolonial nation-state,

²⁴ Henry Schwarz, “Postcolonial Performance: Texts and Contexts of Mahasweta Devi” 1 November 2002 <<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/artist/sharp/issues/0002/pPDF/pPostcolonialPerformance.pdf>>

²⁵ *Douloti the Bountiful in Imaginary Maps*, p.93

which is also a narrative of Douloti's life. Even though the novella's geographical range is limited to the district of Palmau in the Indian state of Jharkhand, it offers a rich and detailed portrayal of the politics of stratification in both its experiential as well as sociological aspects.

Douloti is born in a family of agricultural bonded laborers. The reality of bonded labor, still prevalent in many parts of the country, constitutes the narrative crux of the story.²⁶ It is a system in which when a poor worker borrows a certain sum of money from a landlord or moneylender and is unable to repay it in cash, s/he instead agrees to provide his labor free of charge as a form of repayment. The agreement is supposed to last till the payment of the principal and interest is recovered. Considering that the amount of money borrowed by impoverished workers is necessarily paltry, ideally such agreements should last for short periods. But that is not the way it works. The system thrives on the established fact of the illiteracy and powerlessness of indigent workers. The worker not only does not have any say regarding the terms of the agreement, he is in no position to know if even the terms that are heavily loaded against him are honestly followed by the moneylender. Consequently, once such an agreement is signed, the laborer is practically bonded to the moneylender for life. In fact in most cases, the whole family of the laborer remains practically enslaved to the moneylender.

Douloti's father, Ganori Nagesia, an agricultural worker is bonded to the local landlord Munavar for the measly sum of two hundred rupees that he had borrowed at some point. In the first part of the novella, Douloti, the central protagonist, hardly even

²⁶ For a historical overview as well as a focus on the contemporary aspects of bonded labor in India, see Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney ed. *Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India* (Madras: Sangam Books, 1985).

makes an appearance. Instead in offering us a detailed and intimate picture of the lives of the bonded laborers of the village, the story sets up the context for the life of Douloti. We learn, for instance, how her father, Ganori Nagesia, came to acquire the name Crooked Nagesia. The landlord decides to punish Ganori for his oversight that leads to the death of one of the landlord's bullock. He yokes Ganori to the paddy loaded cart and asks him to pull it to the market. Ganori collapses under the weight and though he survives his accident, his back is permanently broken. Thus his popular name Crooked Nagesia. In her interview with Spivak, Devi informs the reader of the source of this particular story:

I saw Crooked Nagesia with my own eyes... I asked the landlord why he did it. In order to approach the landlords of Palmau you have to say you are a superior government officer taking notes, and that's what I was. The landlord offered me a glass of milk with sugar-cane crystals. He was trying to please me. "You are an upper-caste person," he said. "These bullocks are costly. If I send a bullock, it will suffer in the heat and it will collapse. But these bonded laborers don't count for much. A man can be wasted, a bullock cannot." This was his argument, the perennial argument...²⁷

The incident, hardly an atypical one for the villagers, illustrate their lives of abject poverty and ritual humiliation.

The thirteen year old Douloti provides the impetus for her father's release from bondage. A Brahmin brothel-owner, Parmanad Misra, visits the village from a nearby town in the guise of a priest committed to the alleviation of the misery of bonded laborers. In actuality he visits with the specific purpose of meeting the almost impossible demand of a valued client - a virgin *Harijan* girl. It is hard to find such a girl for almost all low caste women in villages are raped by the landlord and other male members of his family. Parmanand, however, manages to find Douloti who is still a virgin. He promises marriage to her family and as "payment" for the "bride," he negotiates with the landlord

²⁷ "The Author in Conversation," p. xx

her father's release for three hundred rupees. The negotiation is a smooth one because the landlord and the brothel-owner, people of the same class, perfectly understand each other. Also, Ganori with his broken back is not of much use to the landlord as a laborer anymore.

The young, unsuspecting Douloti is thus openly carried away from her home and forcibly made into a prostitute. She too becomes Parmanand's bonded laborer in lieu of the three hundred rupees paid for her father's release. The next sixteen years of Douloti's life in the brothel presents an uncompromising and harrowing portrayal of systematized gendered exploitation. The brothel caters to its clientele with the free labor provided by women like Douloti who are all bonded to Parmanand. Apart from rare instances when a rich client pays enough for maintaining exclusive rights to one woman, the women are made to serve numerous clients everyday. The only payment that they receive in return is their poor quality of room and board. In a few years when the women prematurely age with overwork and venereal diseases, they are thrown out of the brothel, leaving them with the only option of becoming beggars.

Devi's narrative is always at pains to establish that her fiction is closely intertwined with the real national situation. Through firm authorial intrusions or through characters who act as clear spokespersons for the writer it is made quite clear that the depiction of bonded labor system both in the village and in the form of bonded prostitution in the story mirrors real lived experience. Devi's strong authorial presence is also aimed at showing that her chosen locale--Palmau--is a microcosm of the nation at large. Comparisons are repeatedly made through characters or the author between Palmau and other rural regions of the country where the practice of bonded labor flourishes. The

narrative does not even allow the reader the satisfaction of believing that the system of bondage is only a rural phenomenon. Bono, a laborer from Douloti's village, manages to escape from the landlord and try his luck in the city. As a wage laborer in the city he finds that workers like him are practically bonded to the labor-contractor. The contractor thriving with political clout forcibly extracts most of the laborers' pay and ensures that they are unable to form a union. Bono returns to his village.

In the case of Douloti herself, even though her story is definitely individualized, she also serves, in the view of one commentator, as the most significant vehicle for allegorizing the nation:

Douloti is certainly important in her own right, important as a tragically wasted, blighted life, but she is even more important as the site on which a whole variety of the 'the Great Indian meaning' - mythological, historical, socio-cultural, class, castiest and gender - converges to get illuminated as a set of operative, oppressive forces even as they establish a real, material relationship with her. It is in their astonishing range that these forces turn Douloti into a national allegory, an elaborate chargesheet against the nation.²⁸

It is remarkable, however, that the abundance of factual details in the story aimed at capturing the operation of systemic injustice is hardly ever at the expense of the subjective and the experiential. Even as numerous characters populate this novella, most of them are granted a distinct voice and are memorable for their very specific stories.

In one particular scene in the brothel, the general and the particular of the narrative strikingly complement each other. A group of social workers, committed to attempts at social transformation through legal means, visit the brothel. They interview the prostitutes to gather information about the operation of the system of bonded prostitution. Among these urban, educated and socially informed visitors is also Bono, Douloti's

²⁸ Jaidev, "Not by Law Alone: Douloti as a National Allegory." Unpublished Paper, p.6

fellow villager. Bono had left the village yet again, this time ending up as a helper of Father Bomfuller, one of the social workers.

Douloti, like the other prostitutes, feels herself to be too much at a distance from the social workers even as she understands them to be well intentioned. The chasm of class, caste and thus of social experience is too vast to be bridged by ideology alone. But then there is also Bono who is a part of her numerous childhood memories and she naturally gravitates towards him. And it is the illiterate Bono, rather than the other social workers, who is able to empathize with Douloti's suffering. The poignant interaction between them is largely a silent one as Douloti caresses Bono's callused feet and he relates to the language of her fingers. The evocation of her childhood memories of laughter and love brought about by Bono's appearance starkly contrasts with the utter loss of all humanness in her present life. This scene of the silent dialogue between Douloti and Bono with the contrastive backdrop of interviews being conducted by the social workers is masterfully executed.

It needs to be stressed, however, that Devi refuses to privilege either the social or the individual, the general or the particular, at the expense of the other. Even though it is the possibility of meaningful human relationships invoked by the interaction between Douloti and Bono that needs to be salvaged, Devi is never disparaging of the work of activists and researchers like those visiting the brothel. She is all too aware of the need for meaningful connections between activism and experience. She is appreciative of the motivations of the kind of urban intelligentsia visiting the brothel but she is also critical of their approach and method. Her criticism focuses on the experiential and ideological

distance between her subaltern characters and the activists from the upper strata of society.

The distance between these groups--the subaltern and the activist--emerges in the discussions of the visitors to the brothel. Father Bomfuller, leading the group, is a firm believer in a strictly legalistic approach to the solution of the system of bonded labor. His approach is to do surveys, gather data, write reports for the government and hope for laws that would bring about a transformation. Mohan Srivastava, supporter of such an approach, also believes in the power of just laws and in the police force that would force their implementation. Bono, drawing from his own lived experience, shows a simple but devastating fallacy in the reasoning of Bomfuller and Mohan. The enforcement of laws, he says, will be dependent on the upper castes and can thus hardly be beneficial for the poor. When Mohan points out that there is always the police that would enforce the implementation of laws, Bono's response is again commonsensical and utterly realistic: "This Mohanbabu you have said like a gentleman. Police never raise their guns toward the boss or the moneylender. The police kill us."²⁹

Apart from Bono, Prasad Mahato is the only other low-caste member of the group. Prasad questions the Gandhian Puranchand's stance that the subaltern should never turn to violent means as a way of redressing their problems. Referring to an incidence where the villagers resorted to armed rebellion to protest the kidnap and rape of low-caste women, Puranchand objects to the glorification of such rebellion by Prasad: "Try to think by way of peaceful means, Prasadji. You spoke of Bhojpur [the site of the rebellion]. But is it the way to a solution to take up arms to keep the honor of harijan women?" Bono

²⁹ *Douloti the Bountiful*, p. 86

objecting to the doctrine of peace, observes: "Is the honor of our women not honor? The boss lifts our wives and daughters, so you are saying 'Peace Peace - Shanti Shanti.' If someone lifted daughter and wife from your family, would you have said 'Shanti'?" Puranchand's response to Bono's question is extremely instructive: "This doesn't happen in our families."³⁰ Puranchand thus admits to the distance between his ideology and experience and thereby also to the inefficacy of his own convictions. Devi's critique of social reformers like Bomfuller, Mohan and Puranchand is not necessarily a dismissal of their commitment to peaceful and legalistic solutions. Indeed her own work as an activist with subaltern groups has been peaceful and very much within the confines of the law. What she insists on is that for the viability of any movement in the cause of a subaltern group, it has to be primarily based on the involvement of the subalterns themselves. It is only thus that activism and experience can meaningfully complement each other.

Devi incisively focuses on the role of the subaltern's ideology in the perpetuation of an exploitative system. Ganori Nagesia's self perception, for instance, shaped through religious and mythological tropes serves to naturalize his life experiences:

At first Ganori didn't think becoming a Kamiya [bonded laborer] was a special misfortune. He's been seeing kamiyas all over since birth. It's fate decree to become a kamiya. Our Lord Fate comes to write fate on the forehead of the newborn in the dress of a head-shaved brahman. No one can evade what he writes down.

On the high caste boy's forehead he writes property, land cattle, trade, education, job, contract. On the outcaste's forehead he writes bondslavery. The sun and the moon move in the sky by Fate's rule. The poor boys of Seora village become kamiyas of the Munabars. Fate's rule.³¹

³⁰ Ibid., p. 86

³¹ Ibid., p.22

If the subaltern falls prey to a fatalistic ideology that serves the system, the urban educated elite can be as much of a captive to another aspect of the same ideology. The story shows even well-intentioned social researchers subscribing to the belief that the system of bonded labor continues because poor workers are foolish enough to borrow money for religious or social occasions. The narrator intervenes to observe how "the sociologists travel around Palmau and write in their files, every sonofabitch is becoming a kamiya because of weddings-funerals-religious ceremonies."³² It reflects a popular urban notion aided by the media that the responsibility for rural poverty lies largely with the poor themselves. The narrative underlines the similarity between the subaltern's belief that blames fate for all misfortunes and the ideological conviction of the privileged sections that blames the victim for her own condition. In both cases ideology manages to divert attention from the system that practically enslaves people for life.

The critique of ideology in the narrative is achieved mainly through an uncompromising focus on the actual workings of the oppressive system. It shows the nexus between the rural elite and its urban counterpart functioning for their common class interests. Thus Munavar, the rural landlord, aware of possible legal threat to his order, ensures that there is a spokesperson for his interests in the city:

Munabar's son ... is very smart. An important government servant. Now times are different. There is a need to keep one's man in a government department to hang on to the land. His son is an important government servant. Munabar's footing has become much firmer as a result.³³

It is not merely a matter of nepotism based on family ties, the ring of corruption is more structured than that. Dhano, a subaltern himself, realizes that the system of bonded

³² Ibid., p. 49

³³ Ibid., p. 21

labor can never be dismantled by mere legislation because of the ties between government officials and the rural landlords:

The boss-moneylender keeps kamiyas [bonded laborers]. Gormen [government] will anger the boss-moneylender? Never will it anger them. Taking away our land by force they put us in such a state that we must borrow and become kamiyas. And the clerks and officers of the gormen give the boss-moneylender support in that move. As long as this goes on how can bonded labor be over?³⁴

Bono, as a day laborer in a city colliery, discovers a similar nexus between structures of privilege that deprives the laborers of the full share of even their meager earnings: "Government-unine [union]-contractor-slum landlord-market-trader-shopkeeper-post office, each is the other's friend ... They snatched the money. We got it only after they took their cut."³⁵

There are numerous details in the novella that reveal the functioning of the intricate circuit of vested interests by virtue of which exploitative practices become not only acceptable but are even dignified. The strength of Munavar's political clout can be gauged by the fact that the local train makes an unscheduled stop to simply cater to him and the state ministers oblige him with their favors. Similarly, Parmanand Mishra (the brothel owner) boasts at one point, (and there is no reason to doubt him) that he could have received a Padmashree (one of the highest civilian honors bestowed by the state) if only he had worked on it. The nexus between an oppressive economic system and a corrupt political structure is revealed most significantly in the perversion of the cornerstone of democracy--elections. Munavar's mere declaration of support for a candidate ensures his victory, all his bonded laborers vote according to his directions. He

³⁴ Ibid., p. 74

³⁵ Ibid., p.25

also commands a private army of goons who ensure the victory of a candidate by employing whatever means that may be necessary. It is thus the underbelly of the democratic postcolonial state that is laid bare in Devi's narrative.

Douloti, who is forcibly prostituted at a tender age for recovering the paltry sum of three hundred rupees, earns over forty thousand rupees for her brothel owner in fourteen years. What does secure her conditional release, however, is not her earnings but a diseased and dying body unfit for work. The nature of the ideological and administrative failure of the state in reaching out to Douloti is, I think, nicely captured in a seemingly simple detail of the story. The rich client patronizing Parmanand's brothel demands a "fresh, uncut, harijan cunt"³⁶ for himself. The grossly demeaning use of the word *harijan* has been almost naturalized in postcolonial India. Recall that *harijan* or the Children of God was a term introduced by Gandhi to rename the untouchable caste--as his way of removing the stigma from untouchability. Such a gesture without actual efforts to alleviate the condition of the caste members is of course meaningless. The essentially rhetorical character of Gandhi's gesture is brilliantly manifested in the fact that while his term *harijan* has become popular, it still refers to the low-caste with all the demeaning associations attached to the caste. Gandhi's act of changing the signifier while keeping the signified intact is consistent with the exclusion of Doulotis from the postcolonial state even as the state-sponsored nationalist ideology claims to be inclusive of the poor and oppressed.

Her story captures the underlying theme of inhumane exploitation of numerous bonded laborers across the country and indeed of other subaltern groups. It is hardly

³⁶ Ibid., p. 76

surprising that most of these people remain oblivious of their citizenship in a free and democratic nation. At a fund-drive for the purpose of war efforts during the time of India-China war in 1965, one of the low class characters wonders aloud: “but where is China? Where again is India?”³⁷ Similarly when a *sadhu* (priest) visits Douloti’s village and attempts to teach the villagers a lesson or two in patriotism, he encounters firm resistance from a washerwoman:

- [washerwoman -] This is our country?

- [*sadhu* -] Of course.

- Oh, *sadhuji*, my place is Seora Village. What do you call a country. I know *tahsil* [a pre-independence revenue-collecting unit], I know station, I don’t know country. India is not the country.

- Hey, you are all independent India’s free people, do you understand?

No, *sadhuji*.³⁸

The idea of citizenship in a nation draws its moral legitimacy from a sense of inclusion and belonging, a sense of solidarity with all other people of the nation.

Douloti’s story offers a microcosm of the sense of betrayal and isolation of the nation’s dispossessed and thus their understandable sense of non-belonging. The impoverished washerwoman’s resistance to the notion of citizenship in the Indian state is an eloquent testimony to the nation’s failure to live up to the ideal of providing even an imagined sense of national community to its indigent people.

Pterodactyl as a Tale of Two Nations

Pterodactyl, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*, Devi observes, is “an abstract of my entire tribal experience.”³⁹ Devi has worked for over two decades as an activist and organizer

³⁷ Ibid., p.66

³⁸ Ibid., p.41

with the tribal people and she has written numerous journalistic tracts as well as pieces of fiction based on her findings and experience. The tribal population of the country numbers over twenty five million and belongs to hundred fifty different tribes.⁴⁰

Pterodactyl is the story of one such tribe in a place called Pirtha in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The novella is extremely specific in its ethnographic documentation and yet achieves a high form of abstraction in the way it encapsulates the experiential world of the tribal people. The tribal experience is portrayed in the novella through the prism of an “outsider”—a journalist from the city.

The figure of the journalist in search of publishable facts traveling into the interstices of the tribal world—both in the physical and subjective sense—allows the author to dwell on what is arguably the central theme of the story—the distance that separates the mainstream from the marginalized. The journalistic ethic of the central figure, Puran, described early in the novella, exposes the lack of any substantive commitment in mainstream journalism even though there may be engagement with facts of exploitation and misery:

... as a journalist his reporting of the massacres of the harijans at Arwal has received praise, and he too like others, has fallen into disfavor with the Government in Patna. He wrote about the killing in Banjhi with a razor-sharp edge: “Red Blood or Spark of Fire in Black Tribal Skin?” And then water scarcity in Nalipura. Enteric fever epidemic in Hataori. The blinding of prisoners in Bhagalpur ... he is untroubled by the maelstrom of political moves in Bihar or the pre-historic warfare of castism. He gives money to all political parties. He has support everywhere. The newspaper is a business to him. If reporting caste-war keeps his paper going, so be it.... The illustrated magazine called *kamini*, devoted to women and the film world, brings in most money. Right beside a balance sheet on suicide are recipes on the “For the Home” page. Right beside the world travels of an international Guru is

³⁹ “The Author in Conversation,” p. xx

⁴⁰ For a general overview of the Indian tribal population see, Chaturbhuj Sahu, *Indian Tribal Life* (New Delhi : Sarup & Sons, 2001).

the statement of the sex-bomb star: "Motherhood is woman's greatest wealth." This sort of a mixed chow-mien dish.⁴¹

Puran's lack of commitment and want of passion in his profession also pervades his personal life. His inability to commit himself to a woman he has been involved with for many years is characterized by a similar tendency to simply drift with the flow without any sense of purpose. Puran in Devi's narrative is in many senses depicted as the Everyman of modernity, out of depth when confronted with a situation that demands a response which would implicate his world-view and way of life.

It is significant that it is through Puran, the dispassionate urban journalist, that the reader views Pirtha, a tribal inhabitation, at a convenient remove both geographically and culturally from the mainstream. Devi thus ensures that the challenge confronted by Puran in his encounter with the tribal experience is shared by her urban, educated readership who can identify with Puran. The reason for Puran's visit is an invitation from an old friend who is now a Government officer in the region. His friend wishes that Puran should survey and report the near famine conditions of the region. Just the map of Pirtha that his friend shows him is enough to signal to Puran its strange relation to the rest of the country:

The survey map of Pirtha Block is like some extinct animal of Gondwanaland. The beast has fallen on its face. The new era in the history of the world began when, at the end of the Mesozoic era, India broke off from the main mass of Gondwanaland. It is as if some prehistoric creature has fallen on its face then. Such are the survey lines of Pirtha.⁴²

The geographic strangeness of Pirtha is signified by its near inaccessibility and the repeated use of animal imagery to describe its physical features. The peculiarity of the

⁴¹ *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha in Imaginary Maps*, p. 96

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.99

physical landscape of Pirtha is, however, only a minor marker of its difference. Puran hears from his friend that there was another journalist, Surajpratap, who had arrived from the city like him to write about Pirtha. After his Pirtha encounter, that journalist lost his job and suffered a breakdown. It was Surajpratap who had drawn attention to an image of another animal in the context of Pirtha. Puran's friend shows him a picture, taken by Surajpratap, of a painting drawn by a boy in Pirtha, the picture was never released to the press. At the sight of the picture, Puran wonders aloud: "what is it? Bird? Webbed wings like a bat and a body like a giant iguana. And four legs? A toothless gaping horrible mouth."⁴³ The story that follows is, at one level, Puran's unraveling of the mysterious connection between Pirtha and the Pterodactyl--the prehistoric animal on which the painting is based.

If the novella is partly the story of the connection between Pirtha and the Pterodactyl, the other part is the tale of the disconnection between the tribal inhabitants of Pirtha and the citizens of the modernized, developed parts of the nation. Puran's first experience with this "disconnect" is not in his encounters with the tribals but in fact in his conversation with his friend, the government officer. The officer with his own long and close association with the tribals finds it hard to communicate his understanding to Puran:

He [the officer] is moving his hands, trying to explain, as if there's a tremendous communication gap between him and Puran, a tremendous (mental and linguistic) suspension of contract. Are the two placed on two islands and is one not understanding the most urgent message of the other, speaking with vivid gestures on the seashore?⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid., p. 102

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 102

The journalist in Puran recognizes this particular kind of communication gap, he has encountered it before in his work with other subaltern groups:

This asymptote is a contemporary contagion. A man in Mahanadi had split open the head of a guy who had poisoned his water buffalo and had received a life sentence. How valuable is a buffalo that you are going to jail for twenty years? Asked this, the man, collar-bone shaking and foaming at the mouth, had made an effort to explain to Puran what a buffalo meant in the life of a villager. A water-buffalo is a priceless good to a well-to-do farmer.

Puran had not grasped the desperation behind his urgent and troubled message. Although he did turn the man's words into a most compassionate small news item, "For the Sake of a Buffalo."⁴⁵

Puran is yet to learn that his trite conceptual framework and cynical journalistic formulae will not work here as Pirtha is different from anything in modern India. A people living in perennial starvation, largely excluded from even the rhetoric of "progress and development," the tribals have evolved their own way of responding to the outside world that may well be inexplicable to Puran. The officer openly expresses his skepticism regarding Puran's capacity to appreciate the vastly different world of the tribal: "How will I make you understand that is not possible for these tribals to think reasonably, to offer explanations? You will understand them with your urban mentality? You will fathom the Indian Ocean with a foot-ruler?"⁴⁶

Once in Pirtha, Puran experiences for himself the chasm of difference that separates him from the tribal. It is a difference evolved over thousands of years, sharply accentuated by modern India, that Puran encounters in his attempt to communicate with the people. Shankar, one of the Pirtha tribals, has a bit of formal education and acts as a middle-person for allowing some basic communication between Pirtha and the outside world. It is also Shankar's job to escort Puran around Pirtha and help him with his work. But even with Shankar, Puran realizes, communication is not something to be taken for granted.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 102-3

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 104

Shankar speaks the same language that Puran does. But Puran discovers that the comprehensive meaning of language is not restricted to words but the experience encapsulated in those words:

Shankar goes on talking with his eyes closed. Alas! He speaks Hindi; Puran ... also speak[s] Hindi, but how can one touch the other? Shankar says his say in Hindi, but the experience is a million moons old, when they did not speak Hindi. Puran thinks he doesn't understand what language Shankar's people spoke, what they speak. There are no words in their language to explain the daily experience of the tribal in today's India.⁴⁷

Puran learns, for instance, that in Ho, a tribal language, there are no words for "exploitation" or "deprivation." The interrelated concepts of exploitation and deprivation, unknown to the internal social code of many such tribes, have never entered their lexicon either. "In a class divided society [running on] parallel lines," Puran ruminates, "[l]anguage too is class-divided."⁴⁸

In Pirtha, Puran living among the tribals in their utterly impoverished living conditions, tries hard to disguise his marks of class-difference. He, for instance, refuses the offer of a proper bed, accorded to him as a guest, and chooses to sleep on a grass mat instead, like other tribals. But such gestures of solidarity, like his language, he realizes, will always fall hopelessly short: "he sees that's not enough. He feels inadequate ... he can't reach Shankar's people by eating little or sleeping on grass mats. There is a great gulf..."⁴⁹ It is through an appreciation of this "gulf," while living among the tribals, that it dawns on Puran for the first time that with all his investigative journalism about people

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 118

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 163

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 140

in excruciating distress, he has never really known anything. After each one of his journalistic reports he has returned to his dispassionate and commitment-free universe.

Puran wonders why is it that it is to "a half-man, a rootless weed"⁵⁰ like himself that the message of the Pterodactyl reveals itself. During his visit, Puran learns that the tribals of Pirtha had supposedly seen a strange flying animal and that the vision haunts the tribals. Bhikia, a tribal boy, paints a picture of the animal on the wall of his hut and the tribals pay obeisance to the painting as they would do to the symbol of an ancestral soul. The painting corresponds to a prehistoric animal, Pterodactyl, a fact that could hardly be known to the tribals themselves. It is in the magic-realist presence of the Pterodactyl that the narrative locates the essence of tribal existence. Puran, addressing Bhikia's painted image of the prehistoric animal, wonders:

Was some communication established between your prehistoric eyes and his [Bhikia's] eyes, so that he (illiterate, never having read a book, with no knowledge of the history of the evolution of the planet) grasps that to keep your affair secret is tremendously urgent. The world of today cannot be informed about you. "Today" does not know the "past," the "ancient." "Today," "the present times," "civilization," becomes most barbaric by the demands of getting ahead. Yet he doesn't know that "today" desecrates the ancient people's burial grounds by building roads and bridges, cutting down forests. They won't let you go if they know of your existence, that is why he is protecting your visit like the sacred ashes of a funeral pyre or the bones of the dead. He has found some contact. He is a tribal, an aboriginal, you are much more ancient, more originary than his experience, both your existences are greatly endangered.⁵¹

It is thus that Puran, the "hollow man" of modernity, for the first time, has a glimpse into the spirit of the people about whom he is reporting. And his glimpse, interestingly, is precisely an implication of modernity itself. The Pterodactyl represents both the ancient past and the endangered present of the people of Pirtha. Modernity in the

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 60

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 156

form of nationhood and its hollow rhetoric of progress and development has only offered two choices to the tribal--extinction or survival by joining the mainstream where there "social position will be on the ground floor and their sense of ethnic being will no longer be distinct."⁵² Modern India with its socioeconomic marginalization of tribal people has ensured that there can be no liberation for them if they remain faithful to their ancient land and culture. Bikhia knows that at a time when his people are forced to sacrifice everything that they hold dear, what they believe to be the embodiment of their ancestors' soul, in the form of the Pterodactyl, will also leave them very soon:

[He] is witnessing that their ancestors' soul embodied itself and flew in one day, and now it's leaving its form and returning. If it were truly that? Would it have told all the tribals of the burial grounds in the extinct settlement, lying underneath the bridges and paths, the new settlements and fields of grain, that our descendants are disappearing? Their existence is freshly endangered.... Bikhia's eyes are like the still flame of a lamp, he wants to see his fill of the noble death of the noble myth.⁵³

Puran, the urban journalist, glimpses into the truth of tribal existence through Bikhia, and knows only too well that he will never write a report on this experience. He does not have the language that can explain to an outside world, terrorized with the possibility of finding a real Pterodactyl, that the prehistoric animal in Pirtha was both a "myth and a message."⁵⁴

The metaphorical presence of the Pterodactyl in the narrative is indeed an incisive and creative strategy to highlight the distinct identity as well as the present predicament of the tribal population of the country. It is important to stress at this point, however, that while Devi draws attention to the tremendous marginalization of a whole ethnic culture in

⁵² Ibid., p. 180

⁵³ Ibid., p. 180

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 195

the history of postcolonial India, there is never any tendency toward reification of cultural identity in her writing. Her argument is against a top-down nationalism that does not allow a people to maintain their social and cultural identity with dignity and respect. In her interview with Spivak, she clarifies that her position should not be translated as a celebration of distinct and autonomous ethnicities.⁵⁵ In fact the exoticism of tribal culture by the mainstream, often the flip side of such celebration, is a primary target of her critique in the novella.

The exoticism of culture, with its accompanying evasion of fundamental socioeconomic issues, is shown to be quite compatible with bourgeois nationalism. Puran, for instance, learns that in political rallies in districts with tribal populations, it is quite common to include an item of cultural performance by the tribals. The same politicians of course remain uninterested in meaningfully addressing the socioeconomic issues effecting the tribals. Puran is also warned by Harisharan, who understands the politics of exoticism, that in his report, Puran should not mention anything about the whole story around ancestors' soul, instead he should only focus on the famine conditions in Pirtha. The story about the Pterodactyl and ancestors' soul is easy to sell because of the way it exoticises the tribals. But each time such a story become popular, it marginalizes the other story about the perennial starvation conditions of the same people.

The politics of exoticism is perhaps best exposed in the incident about a documentary film that is being shot on the tribals of Pirtha. The ostensible logic behind the making of the film is that when shown to an international audience, it will garner international moral and financial support for Pirtha. It is significant that what the

⁵⁵ "The Author in Conversation," p. xvii

narrative questions is not the possibility of such support but its desirability. It questions the hollowness of what is basically a resort to international charity by exposing the misery of a people. It is also extremely significant that Devi problematizes the politics of popular non-governmental organizations by focusing on the tribals themselves, whose welfare is allegedly the primary objective of such organizations. There is intense resistance to the filmmakers in Pirtha, the tribals do not wish to be filmed for their abject poverty and humiliation. Shankar wishes to voice the resistance of his people:

... will you make me say that we are surrendering? ... Everything finally becomes a deal, even giving food to the hungry. At this moment we're eating his food, in exchange he wants to capture us in film. His dictionary cannot include the self-respect of the hungry.⁵⁶

But such thoughts are futile. The film is made for the supposed welfare of the tribals regardless of their own feelings about it:

Now the pictures are taken. The women cover their faces with the torn end of their cloth. The men turn their faces away. The scene of an old woman holding a skeleton baby in arms taking lentil-rice in her bowl, is captured very well and when the tape recorder is held close you can catch the rattle in the old woman's throat and the mumble as well as the child's chirping wail.⁵⁷

The "realism" of such portrayal at once denies agency to the subaltern and evades issues of structural causes for poverty. What is repudiated here is not merely the seamy underside of the politics of international charity but more importantly the utter failure of the national government to structurally address the issue of socioeconomic and cultural marginalization of the tribal people. For it is precisely the failure, if not the betrayal, of the postcolonial nation state that forces its indigent population to become recipients of international charity with all its attendant humiliation.

⁵⁶ *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha*, p. 168

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 169

The systematized corruption of the national elite is as always a major target of Devi's critique in the narrative. Even though the state is compelled to sanction financial assistance for tribal welfare, the funds rarely reach the needy. The implementation of state policies hijacked by vested interests with political clout ensure the isolation and disempowerment of the tribal:

Their [the tribal's] link with the world above is to go to the market, to sell goats and the strong-smelling yogurt and clarified butter made of goat's milk, to buy food grain, oil, salt, clothing. Whenever they come up they see the broad arrogant roads. These roads have been built with the money sanctioned for tribal welfare so that the owners of bonded labor, the moneylender, the touts and pimps, the abductors, and the bestial alcoholic young men lusting after tribal women can enter directly into the tribal habitations.⁵⁸

The narrative draws attention to widespread corruption in the matter of land-ownership, a key issue pertaining to the economic marginalization of the tribals. The ownership of arable land makes all the difference between sustenance and starvation for a agricultural community. Recognizing this fact, the state passed laws making it illegal for non-tribals to acquire tribal land. The law enures that in a dispute involving ownership of land, a tribal will have the assistance of special officers charged to look out for tribal welfare. In reality, however, such assistance remain a hoax. Upper-caste non-tribals buy land in fake tribal name and the tribal owner of the land receives nothing. It works with inside-arrangement involving highly placed officers in the bureaucracy.

Devi's focus on the actual functioning of the system shows how political legislation remain meaningless without any political will for implementation. The safeguards and rights provided in the constitution and subsequent legislation has thus made hardly any difference to the predicament of the tribal.:

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 108

What is theirs by right? The constitutional rights of 7.76 percent of the population of India ...[t]hey have not yet been informed of this ...

What an immense deal of labor and money is spent to keep up this directive of non-information. How many subtle heads work hard. How many political knots are tied.

What was theirs by right. The Adivasis [aboriginal] will enter the twenty-first century, ignorant of this in their shadowy habitation.⁵⁹

The repeated focus on the use of state issued posters by the tribals is a brilliant strategy that the novella employs to debunk the nationalist narrative. Posters announcing packaged information and catchy slogans have been a standard method in postcolonial India for disseminating the state's line on various issues ranging from birth control to communal amity. Government postering has become a recognizable icon of statist nationalism. It is not surprising that even the tribal areas are inundated by such posters. For the tribal, however, the message lies not in the words of the poster, but in the quality of the paper that is used: "Yesterday the Sarpanch [chief] arrived and distributed bundles of posters. 'End separatism, keep communal harmony intact, and renounce the path of violence.' Dimag's wife was saying, This paper is not god, too thin."⁶⁰ The quality of the paper matters because of its multiple uses to the impoverished tribal:

Harisharan had brought for the Sarpanch today posters proclaiming that "Leprosy can be cured if caught in time. Go to the nearest leprosy hospital." The paper is good, the posters large-sized. The crowd has opined that it is a help that the government is giving such paper. Pasted on grass frames such paper will keep out the wind. The women say they can lay their babies down on it. You can sift the relief food grains on it. It is useful in many ways.⁶¹

The discourse of the welfare state is here literally reduced (or elevated) to its material worth.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 110

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 153

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 174

Pterodactyl shows how a materialist reading of culture need not be a reductive one. While the narrative depicts both the everyday reality and the oral traditions of the tribal with insight and compassion, it also constantly draws out the interconnections between the socioeconomic structure and the culture of the tribal. The tribal's deep investment in the folklore of a glorious past when they lived with dignity and respect is, for instance, at once embraced by the narrator and yet understood in materialist terms:

These people are fully in exile. They have not received anything from modern India.

... How can he [Shankar as a tribal] abandon the past? They don't know if the past is legend or history, and no researcher comes to separate the two. And who is going to tell us what is legend and what history from the perspective of these totally rejected tribals? Where is the boundary between history and story?⁶²

The boundary between history and legend is deeply entangled in tribal culture because there is no other history that they can call their own. "Modern India," has only given them "posters for family planning."⁶³ The tribal has never been included in the process of decolonization and has been denied a space in *national* history. It is only natural then that the tribal takes pride in her own legend/history that offers a sense of past and of shared belonging.

The ideology of nationalism requires at a fundamental level that a people have a sense of shared history as well as a sense of belonging in the present and a stake in the future of the nation. Unmitigated socioeconomic marginalization and cultural isolation, however, has ensured that the tribal remains an outsider to the evolution of Indian

⁶² Ibid., p.146

⁶³ Ibid., p. 146

nationalism. Devi's own voice is unmistakable in the narrative with its allegation of this betrayal of the nation:

... [W]e have destroyed a continent that we kept unknown and undiscovered. The tribal wants human recognition, respect, because he or she is the child of an ancient civilization. In what a death farce we are enthralled as we turn them into beggars, who are nowhere implicated in Indian education, development, science, industry, agriculture, technology. They remain spectators. India marches towards the twenty-first century.⁶⁴

The unmistakable image that emerges from Devi's portrayal of the lived experiences of undercastes and tribals is the vivid presence of a nation within a nation. Arundhati Roy, another Indian writer and crusader for social justice, arrives at a similar image in her study of the politics of the nation's "development projects" like big dams. Commenting on the staggering figure of fifty million indigent people who have been displaced by such projects, of whom an overwhelming majority are undercastes and tribals, Roy observes:

The ethnic 'otherness' of their victims takes some of the pressure off the Nation builders. It's like having an expense account. Someone else pays the bills. *People from another country. Another world.* India's poorest people are subsidizing the lifestyles of the rich (emphasis mine).⁶⁵

✓ For all her rage and protest against the nation state, Devi, like Ambedkar, is no anti-nationalist. Hers is primarily a voice that calls for recognition and inclusion of the nation's dispossessed who, she proclaims, are "Indians who belong to the rest of India. Mainstream India had better recognize that. Pay them the honor that they deserve."⁶⁶ This

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.177

⁶⁵ Arundhati Roy, "The Greater Common Good." *Frontline* 16.11 (1999). 1 November 2002
<<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1611/16110040.htm>>

⁶⁶ "The Author in Conversation," p. xvii

voice of critical warning, emerging from her literature, opens up the possibility for the necessary task of a renewed evaluation of the failed ideals of nationhood.

CHAPTER 5

SPEAKING WITH A FORKED TONGUE: NATIONALISM IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

In this chapter, we will look at the emergence of critiques of nationalism in Indian English Literature (hereafter referred to as IEL) since the early eighties. The history of IEL goes back over a hundred and fifty years. Since its inception, IEL has shared an intimate relationship with nationalist ideology. The dynamics of this relationship have varied over different periods, and at times even within the same period, but the tie has been persistent. The chapter begins by unpacking the reasons behind the relationship between nationalism and IEL. It particularly focuses on the nature of this relationship as manifested in some central texts of IEL since the nineteen forties, the era of political independence. The attitude to nationalism in these texts, since the forties, has varied from the celebratory, to critical acceptance, to denial, and rejection. However, it is only since the nineteen eighties that a dominant strain of IEL has emerged offering critiques of nationalist ideology from hitherto unexplored perspectives. Due to both their literary styles and political leanings, (the two are arguably interconnected), the early eighties should be considered a watershed period for IEL. I offer readings of texts by two Indian English writers in this period, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, as illustration of this new phenomenon, where the hundred and fifty-year-old knot between IEL and nationalist ideology is finally untied.

I have resisted the temptation of characterizing the literature under discussion as *immigrant* literature. One reason for the temptation is the fact that the two writers, whose

works I discuss are both expatriate Indian writers, second, designating the literature as immigrant (identifying a group first) would be more in keeping with the rest of the dissertation. However, the term “immigrant literature” would be both descriptively and analytically, inaccurate as a title for IEL. It is descriptively inaccurate because IEL is produced by writers both within India and abroad; analytically, the term, immigrant, fails to encompass the large gamut of concerns that this literature encompasses. Thus even as the two writers under discussion are located outside India, I read their works as representative of IEL and for the critiques of nationalism that they offer. And even though, unlike in the earlier chapters, a literature rather than a group is the basis for selection here, the present discussion still squarely falls under the rubric of critique of nationalist ideology in Indian literature.

In each of the earlier chapters, I first identify a group (women, marginalized castes and tribes and religious minorities), and then proceed to look at the critique of nationalism in the literatures produced by and about the group. The present chapter, however, focuses on the critique of nationalism emerging not from a group, but from a genre, characterized by the *language* in which it is written, English. Yet the study of this genre is crucial for a project attempting to offer a critique of nationalism based on literary discourse. Contemporary Indian literature in English brings into sharp relief some of the central concerns regarding nationalist ideology expressed in the earlier chapters. The literature, for instance, focuses on the process of subject formation, undertaken by a dominant ideology by the systemic marginalization of subaltern agency and identity. The interesting *difference* between this body of literature and the literature discussed in the previous chapters lies in the former’s active engagement with an alternative notion of

social solidarity. It shows how the idea of a national community is consistent with the critique of nationalist ideology.

The Politics of English Language

British colonial rule was responsible for introducing the study of the English language in India. The extensive research on the subject is unanimous in the view that even though the British offered their "civilizing mission" as the principal motivation behind the institution of English studies in India, the actual reasons were political and ideological, serving the interests of the empire.¹ The British needed a class of English-educated Indians for efficiently running the administration of the vast empire. Further, the incorporation of some Indians in the prestigious administrative services had the added advantage of demonstrating the fairness of the empire, without making any meaningful concession. English studies, especially the study of English literature, was viewed as a mode of propagation of such "enlightened" values as would justify the continuance of colonial rule. Gauri Vishwanathan has shown how the different stages of the consolidation of the English literary canon in India reflected the changing interests of the empire.² In addition, a general climate of ignorance and disrespect of Indian languages and literatures within the colonial ruling class also helped in the consolidation of English studies at the expense of native linguistic and literary traditions.

Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education," in which he recommends to the Governor General in Council that Britain should withdraw

¹ For some recent studies on the subject, see N. Krishnaswamy, and Archana S. Burde. *The Politics of Indian's English*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); R. K. Agnihotri, and A. L. Khanna. *Problematizing English in India*, (New Delhi: Sage, 1997); Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

² *Masks of Conquest*, 1989.

governmental support to Sanskrit and Arabic and officially support English education is generally regarded as one of the most significant documents in the history of English education in India.³ Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan points out that the two chief purposes of English education which can be called “the ‘instrumental’ and the ‘integrative,’ were forwarded by Macaulay in his minute with no awareness of contradiction in such doubleness of purpose.”⁴ In his minute, after admitting that he had no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic, Macaulay’s goes on to proclaim that a “single shelf of a good European library [is] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” After summarily dismissing non-Western languages and scholarship as fit for neither law nor religion, Macaulay claims that the natives themselves desire learning English to better themselves. And while he admits that it is impossible for the government to take on the responsibility of educating the body of the people, what can and needs to be done is to “form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” It can be argued that the “instrumental” and “integrative” purposes of the minute that Sunder Rajan points out are in fact indistinguishable from each other. The ideological imperative to “integrate” the natives was as “instrumental” in empowering the cause of the empire as the political expediency of creating a class of English educated Indians – there is no “doubleness of purpose” in Macaulay’s minute. The Governor General, William Bentinck, accepted the recommendation of Macaulay’s Minute and

³ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The Complete Works of Lord Macaulay*, (New York: Lojgmans Green and Co., 1898).

⁴ Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, “Fixing English: Nation, Language, Subject.” *The Lie Of The Land: English Literary Studies in India*, ed. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

passed the English Education Act in 1835, thus marking the most significant landmark in the institution of English education in India.

The eventual consolidation of English both in British and post-independent India did face considerable challenges from the anti-colonial movement and the native intelligentsia.⁵ The opposition to English was based primarily on two motivations: English symbolized colonial rule and Indian servility; second, it was a distant and alien language for the overwhelming masses of the country. Education in Indian languages was viewed not only to be an affirmation of independent nationhood, but “the proper teaching of the mother tongue,” the Zakir Hussain Committee recommended, was also the “foundation of all education.”⁶ However, there was also influential support for English within the anti-colonial movement. Again, two broad areas can be identified from which the advocacy of English originated. English was the language of the political class, of key sectors of the administration and the judiciary. The anti-colonial leadership emerging from the small section of English educated Indians soon realized the significance of the “master’s” language to subvert his rule. Even as English was used in the struggle against colonialism, it also got entrenched as a preferred language of the anti-colonialist intelligentsia. There was another crucial reason for advocating English education in India – the dilemma presented by an extremely multilingual political entity. The presence of scores of regional languages (officially 21 at present) made it hard to select any one language as the lingua franca, because it always carried the possibility of appearing an

⁵ For a historical account of the response to the introduction of English education in India, see Surendra Prasad Sinha, Chapters Four and Five. *English In India*, (Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1978).

⁶ Qtd. in J. C. Aggarwal, *Landmarks in the History of Modern Indian Education*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983).

imposition to the people who did not speak that language. English, it was argued, as a "neutral" language, would not similarly be viewed as an imposition.

The cause of English found an ardent supporter in Jawahar Lal Nehru, a stalwart of the anti-colonial movement and India's first Prime Minister. In supporting English, Nehru was of course partly responding to the multilingual situation referred to above. But it is also absolutely crucial to recognize that Nehru symbolized that duality dominant in the native intelligentsia, whose anti-colonial credentials were impeccable and yet which believed the West to be the repertoire of desirable civilizational values.⁷ India would reject English, the language of science and technology, Nehru said, only with the "danger of our getting cut off from the world of thought in all its aspects and becoming complacent in our own little world of India."⁸ Even as Nehru remained instrumental in firmly consolidating the position of English in free India, a note of dissent was issued, above all, by his comrade and guide, M. K. Gandhi. Throughout his political life, Gandhi, staunchly opposed the imposition of English in India and instead advocated the use of Hindustani as the lingua franca for India.⁹

In his speech at a language conference in 1916, Gandhi, whose native language was not Hindi, said "...I speak to you, brothers, in that broken Hindi of mine, because even if I speak a little of English, I have the feeling that I am committing a sin."¹⁰ The "sin" in

⁷ For a pioneering discussion on the issue of this "duality" in the native intelligentsia, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

⁸ Qtd. in Robert D. King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 127

⁹ For a discussion of the conflict between Nehru and Gandhi on the issue, see King, 1997.

¹⁰ Qtd. in King, 82.

the usage of English, for Gandhi, lay not only in the colonial stigma of the language but in a much more significant area, that was almost overlooked by Nehru and his compatriots. Gandhi recognized the *elite* character of the language in the Indian context and thus its divisive role, he repeatedly pointed out the "gulf [that the English language] created between the educated classes and the uneducated masses."¹¹ With a firm understanding that the purpose of any language is context specific, he said, "In England one discusses high politics with barbers while having a shave. We are unable to do so even in our family circle, not because the members of the family or the barber are ignorant people."¹² Above all, Gandhi contemptuously dismissed the view that English was inseparable from the democratizing project: "Of all the superstitions that affect India, none is so great as that knowledge of the English language is necessary for developing ideas of liberty, and developing accuracy of thought."¹³ If anything, the class character of English in India works *against* the ideal of meaningful democracy. Gandhi's characterization of English remains accurate in contemporary India where only about 5% of its massive population are conversant in English. And this English educated section is almost exclusively constitutive of the urban elite, making the language a symbol of a fiercely class divided society.

Lit. Crit. of IEL

The foregoing account provides the essential backdrop against which the peculiar situation of Indian English writers needs to be conceptualized. Decrying the use of

¹¹ M. K. Gandhi. *Evil Wrought by the English Medium*, ed., K. N. Prabhu (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1958) 6.

¹² Qtd. in *Rethinking English : Essays in Literature, Language, History*, ed. Svati Joshi. (New Delhi : Trianka, 1991) 284

¹³ Gandhi, 10.

English by African writers, the Kenyan writer and activist, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O observed, "[t]he choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe."¹⁴ The Indian English writer has inevitably been haunted by doubts and self questioning, as she intrinsically realizes, like Thiong'O, the centrality of language to a culture. As the previous section showed, English is inextricably connected not only with the nation's colonial past, but it is also a marker of the privileges that distinguishes a small minority from the rest of the population. Unfortunately, a language that is mired in a continuing history of oppression cannot offer its user the luxury of indifference.

Literary criticism of IEL, from its very outset, has engaged with this issue of the usage of English by Indian writers. This substantial body of literary criticism addresses every possible aspect of the language issue: the desirability of choosing English as a literary medium by Indians, the practicability of doing so, the defense of IEL, the literary dilemmas of the Indian English writer, the changing character of IEL are only some examples.¹⁵ In 1933, Latika Basu, questioned the very production of IEL and made the nationalistic proclamation that "[a]s long as the vernaculars in India are... alive it should be the aim of Indians to develop them, for writing in a foreign tongue can serve no useful purpose."¹⁶ IEL criticism has repeatedly foregrounded the tension between English and the regional languages of India. Writing over two decades later, the Bengali writer,

¹⁴ Ngugi Wa Thiong'O *Decolonising the Mind : The Politics of Language in African literature*, (London: Heinemann, 1986) 4.

¹⁵ See Adil J Jussawalla, ed., *New Writing in India Family Quarrels : Towards A Criticism of Indian Writing in English*, (New York : P. Lang, 1985).

¹⁶ Latika Basu, *Indian Writers of English Verse*, (Calcutta, University of Calcutta Press, 1933).

Jyotirmoy Datta, observed that while the vernacular writer draws his subject from “living lips,” the writers in English produces “novels feeding on past novels, poems springing from other poems,” he called it a “nightmare of sterility.”¹⁷ Datta refers to the lone predicament of the Indian writer in English as “bastilled by 360 million” Indians. However, Datta believed that this “Bastille” is a self-chosen one and that the natural inclination of any writer should be to write in his mother tongue, “the true language of his soul.” P. Lal, a poet in English himself, but better known as the founder of the “Writer’s Workshop” in Calcutta, disagreed with Datta’s invective.¹⁸ Lal attempted to undermine, rather overturn, the terms of the conflict between the vernaculars and English by claiming, first, that English is an Indian language, and second, that while the regional languages were just that, only the writer in English “can hope to attain the Indian flavour, which is a cosmopolitan flavour.”

In the post-Rushdie decades of the eighties and nineties, with an impressive body of Indian literature in English that has shown unquestionable signs of growth and maturity and has been widely accepted and recognized, the older debates have not died away. If anything, they have intensified. In a recent, ambitious, but rather sloppily argued article, Vikram Chandra, himself a novelist, attempts to defend IEL against the array of charges levied by its critics.¹⁹ Chandra believes that critics of IEL are primarily motivated by a kind of “nativism” and a moralistic attitude that makes them protective towards an abstract and non-existent notion of “real India.” The critique of IEL, then proceeds from

¹⁷ Jyotirmoy Datta, “On Caged Chaffinches and Polygot Parrots,” *Ten Years of Quest*, ed. Abu Sayeed Ayyub and Amlan Datta (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1966) 286-96.

¹⁸ P. Lal, “Indian Writing in English: A Reply to Mr. Jyotirmoy Datta,” Ayyub and Datta, 297-303.

¹⁹ Vikram Chandra, “The Cult Of Authenticity,” *Boston Review* February-March 2000: 42-49.

the view that it distorts and misrepresents this "real India," another aspect of the "all devouring and all distorting West." Chandra points out the cosmopolitan character of urban India and designates any notion of an authentic India as misplaced. Second, Chandra takes strong exception to the position of IEL critics on the issue of language. Taking issue with their (IEL critics') idea of English being an alien language in India, he argues that it is not that most people know English, but that "those who have no English understand that certain avenues to power are closed to them, that there are many jobs for which they are instantly considered unfit, that they are closed out of certain discussions, that they are socially marked." In other words, Chandra's claim is that precisely because English is the lingua franca of power and privilege, it is not an alien and a foreign language and therefore, writing in English, the Indian writer should have to offer no apology. Chandra's final and most fervent plea is that Indian English writers have been hounded for too long by self appointed "commissars of culture" and that they should now be left alone. His word of advice to his fellow Indian English writers is to ignore all criticisms (and even praise) of their writings that are underpinned by any political concerns and instead devote themselves to the single-minded worship of their muse.

I refer to Chandra's article in some detail because he powerfully misrepresents some of the most substantive aspects of IEL criticism. His plea to ignore all political criticism proceeds from the old and fantastic desire to claim that art exists for its own sake. It is ultimately an insistence that the writer's political positions should be outside the scope of literary criticism. The argument is of course untenable because of the inevitable intersection of literature and politics. It is instructive that Chandra even misses the political substance of the IEL criticisms that he does address.

On the issue of language, the justification that Chandra offers for English is a rather strange and unsustainable one. He seems to understand that English is not merely a signifier of class in the Indian postcolonial context, but what is extremely significant, that the language is also a facilitator of class rule. The idea of questioning English, then, is not to claim that it is an alien language, as Chandra suggests; instead, it is to focus on the *alienating effect* that the language necessarily generates in a fiercely stratified society. To recognize the problematic position of English is not to claim that all IEL is thereby tainted, but it is to recognize an important condition within which IEL is produced. Finally, on the issue of the alleged moralistic attitude and the “nativism” of IEL criticism, Chandra, once again, misses the finer point. The criticism is not that IEL fails to represent the “correct India,” it is that Indian writers writing in English feel compelled to reproduce problematic constructions of Indianness in their works. The next section of the paper elaborates this criticism with examples from IEL.

Nationalism in IEL

The above instances of bitter attacks and spirited defense well represent the highly charged atmosphere of IEL criticism in general. The reason for why passions have always raged high on the matter is that something rather significant, something well beyond the bounds of literary production, is at stake. The Indian writer in English finds that her national loyalty is under scrutiny. As I have tried to show earlier, English in India is not a neutral language, it bears the burden of colonialism and class. Literary writing, in any language, presupposes not merely a skillful command of the language but a certain intimacy with it. To the extent that language is a marker of sociality, the intimacy with English carries the potential charge of a questionable attitude towards colonialism and class privilege.

While the antithetical relationship between colonialism and nationalism is self evident, it needs to be stressed that in the postcolonial Indian context, a defense of comprehensive class distinction can well be viewed as anti-nationalistic. The country's colonial past is largely understood to be responsible for its paralyzing poverty. Thus the dominant nationalist rhetoric has always identified itself with the poor and the underprivileged. English, the language of the privileged, carries, at the very least, the charge of class snobbery, and more exhaustively, it could question the user's nationalist loyalty. The Indian writer in English, then, has always been treated as a bit of a suspect, not only by her critics, or even the larger readership, but also by herself.

In an insightful article, Meenakshi Mukherjee identifies the phenomenon that results from the peculiar pressures under which IEL is produced as the "anxiety of Indianness."²⁰ Writing in the colonial language, the writer keenly feels the pressure to prove his/her loyalty to the nation. Mukherjee observes that in their "anxiety" to prove their "Indianness" as a "compensatory act" for the "supposed alienness/elitism of the language," the Indian English writers tend to "deploy certain thematic or formal devices to tether their texts to indigenous contexts." Indeed from its very inception, IEL has been witness to such "anxieties" or engagements with the burden of inhabiting the language of the colonizer. In 1938, Raja Rao in the foreword to his novel *Kanthapura* had written: "[t]he telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own a spirit that is one's own... the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. English... is the language of our

²⁰ Meenakshi Mukherjee, "The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English," *Economic and Political Weekly* November, 27 (1993) : 2607-2611.

intellectual make up, like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make up.”²¹

Rao's *Kanthapura* is an instructive instance of a writer's attempts to wrest free from the implications of using an “alien” language as well as the weight of the literary traditions that the language carries within it. Rao proposes an English that is far removed from the land of its origin. He calls for a nativization of the language and the creation of an indigenous mode of writing that in time would be as “distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American” version of English.²² The new hybrid language has to be rich and various enough so as to capture the distinctive “tempo of Indian life.” This, Rao believes, can only be possible through an infusion of Indian linguistic and literary traditions into English expression. After laying out his literary and intellectual agenda in the foreword, Rao goes on to create a truly multicultural text where standard English undergoes a striking metamorphosis. In an English that is suffused with the idiom and expressions of his native Kannada, Rao unfolds a contending version of history that rejects linearity in favor of the Indian version of cyclical time derived from its mythological texts. The Gandhian phase of the national movement is narrativized in the novel through oral tales, myths, memories, rumors and gossip. Rao's work is significant for our present discussion because he was the first to acutely render shape and voice to the anxieties of the Indian English writer and to envisage the possibility of an alternative model of Indian English writing.

²¹ Raja Rao, *Kanthapura*, (New York: New Directions, 1963).

²² Rao is viewed to be one of the pioneers in the use of pidgin English by postcolonial critics. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, (London: Routledge, 1989).

It is unfortunate that some of the radical literary possibilities signaled by *Kanthapura* remained largely unexplored not only by Rao's contemporaries, but by the author himself, beyond his first novel. In Rao's later works like *The Serpent and the Rope*, the creative engagement in formulating an indigenous and distinctive narrative mode is replaced by an adherence to simplistic and reductive notions of "Indianness". As Rumina Sethi, in her full length study of Rao notes, in his later works "the romance/metaphysical far outweighs the history/nationalistic model."²³ Thus, instead of working on a literature drawing from an engagement with the broader culture and its history (as *Kanthapura*, in many senses was), Rao started equating India with only its spiritual aspects, and the spiritual with just the esoteric Brahmanical world-view.

Other writers, in varying degrees, echo a similar preoccupation with identity that often manifests itself in what has come to be termed as the "East-West theme." The theme refers to the lasting cultural impact of colonialism in the lives of the people. Even as the significance of the subject is unquestionable, its treatment by Indian English writers becomes problematic on two related scores. The need for literary probing of the pervasive and insidious influence of colonialism in the culture and psychology of the people tends to be replaced by easy and glib generalizations about the East-West encounter and by privileging it over other aspects of communal life.

G. V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr*, a highly stylized, allegory of the psychology of the colonial subject, for instance, would be an ideal candidate for the genre of "East-West" novels. It would be much less easy to categorize the works of the more widely known R.K. Narayan. Narayan's novels set in the fictional town of Malgudi with its

²³ Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation : National Identity and Literary Representation*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999).

characters involved in the human drama of life, self consciously stray away from political concerns and ideologies.²⁴ And yet, it is in their very denial that Narayan's texts play out the "East-West" theme with its attendant construct of India. By refusing to be located in recognizable space and rejecting any significant involvement with specific political concerns, Narayan's novels lay claim not to this or that geographical region or social concern but to the whole of India and its "timeless" concerns. Graham Greene, in his introduction to one of Narayan's novels, observes that in the Malgudi novels "we are aware not of an individual author, with views on politics and social reform, or with personal mysticism to express, but of a whole national condition."²⁵ Delightful as Narayan's novels are, it doesn't help to overlook that the allegedly quintessentially "Indian" world of Malgudi is after all Hindu, its ethos, upper-caste, its values resistant to change, not only from contact with the West, but also from indigenous political movements. It is unquestionably a writer's privilege to choose the parameters within which he or she wants to function and Narayan does a wonderful job within his selected parameters. But to view in the world of Malgudi, the "national condition," as Greene does, is to submit to an easy and available reductionism that hardly represents the nation.

Unlike Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, deeply influenced by marxist theory and social movements, attempted to represent the plight of the underprivileged sections in his novels, like *The Untouchable* and *Coolie*. Similarly, Kamla Markandya, tried to foreground the sufferings of the poor Indian woman in her works like *Nectar in a Sieve*. Yet, even in these novels which avow social realism, the representation of a community

²⁴ The only exception to this is Narayan's least acknowledged novel *Waiting for the Mahatma*, (London : Methuen, 1955)

²⁵ R. K. Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

functioning in various local and specific registers is sacrificed in favor of the anxiety to present a pan-Indian situation. Once again, the need to portray "Indianness" takes precedence over an engagement with the lived reality of community and individual experiences. Mukherjee suggests that it is the writer's uncertainty about her reader's insider knowledge of the culture that pushes her towards a "minimalistic representation" and a "greater pull towards a homogenization of reality, an essentializing of India, a certain flattening out of the complicated and conflicting contours, the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals and groups in a plural community."²⁶ It is perhaps this gap between the complex and conflicting reality of the nation and its literary representation that prompted Mahatma Gandhi to observe that Mulk Raj Anand's under-caste characters in *The Untouchable* sounded too much like Bloomsbury intellectuals.²⁷ It is ironic that in the works of these writers, the act of writing in English generates the need to identify with the nation, but the anxiety of identification leads the writer away from the actual lived reality of the nation toward rarefied ideological constructs.

It needs to be noted that by no means do all texts written prior to the eighties fall under the broad category of nationalism in IEL. Writers like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, for instance, focusing on middle class women's lives and family experiences, have largely steered clear of the preoccupation with nation and nationalism.²⁸ What I have tried to sketch is the *dominant* trend in the literature of the pre-Rushdie period. The

²⁶ Mukherjee, 2608.

²⁷ Qtd. in Pankaj Mishra, "little Inkling," *Outlook* 15 November 1999, <<http://www.outlookindia.com/19991115/pankaj.htm>> 2.

²⁸ The one novel where Desai explores the issue of immigrant experiences is *Bye, Bye, Blackbird*, (New Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 1985)

few texts that do lie outside the dominant paradigm of nationalism in that period, do not in any way challenge the paradigm, as do the texts that will be discussed presently.

It is only in the early eighties, beginning with Rushdie that the anxiety of nationalism is subjected to scrutiny and rejection by some IE writers. A variety of complex social factors generated the new trend in IEL in which nationalism came to be regarded with a strong dose of suspicion. Historically, the country had witnessed a definite shift from the socialist and secular ideals of the anti-colonial movement. The declaration of a state of national Emergency by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975, solely to protect her political position, worked to undermine the democratic basis of the polity. The national intelligentsia shared a general sense of disenchantment with the lofty idealism of the anti-colonial moment and disillusionment about the nation's political destiny. At this historical juncture, for the Indian English writer, the imaginative possibilities for the construction of a homogenous national community were rather meager. Instead an engagement with the sociopolitical travails of the young nation as well as a reevaluation of the failing ideals of nationalism appeared to be the more desirable alternative.

The (II)legitimacy of Nationalism

The legitimacy of nationalism, especially in the context of postcolonial societies has been a contentious theoretical issue. The ideological import of cultural production has also been at stake in these debates. Homi K. Bhabha, for instance, ascribes the despotic and "grim prose of power" that nations wield to their "historicist" constructions that claim their "impossible unity",²⁹ and their "historical certainty and settled nature"³⁰.

²⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, ed. *Nation and Narration*, (London ; New York : Routledge, 1990) 1

Rejecting such "historicist" narratives, Bhabha proposes a study of nations in terms of narratives of "temporality" and "locality." He privileges the *here and now* of cultural production over historical perspectives. It is only through narratives of the "present of people's history" that the authoritarianism of nationalist ideology can be questioned and the "*international dimension*" (emphasis in original) of people's cultures be realized. Bhabha celebrates the internationalist rewriting of nations with his image of the dissolution of national boundaries altogether: "America leads to Africa; the nation of Europe and Asia meet in Australia..."

Fredric Jameson would find Bhabha's rejection of nation states to be rather premature, if not questionable. In one of his much discussed essay,³¹ Jameson contends, that the rightful questioning of nationalist ideology in the first world might not be politically a desirable trend to be followed in the context of the third world. Nationalism, according to Jameson, is significant if the "radical difference" of the third world, in the spheres of politics and culture, is to be maintained. The rejection of nationalism opens up the possibility of the negation and/or representational appropriation of "third world" realities by North American postmodernist culture. Jameson then makes his significant claim that "third world" cultural productions embody the "radical difference" of that world and in that sense "all third world texts are *national allegories*" (emphasis in original).

As nationalism has been a preeminent motif in IEL, it may be viewed to be an illustration of Jameson's argument that third world texts are national allegories. The

³⁰ Bhabha, 292

³¹ Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital," *Social Text Theory/Culture/Ideology* Fall (1986): 65-88.

fundamental problem with this phenomenon in IEL, however, is that in spite of all their claims and desires to be nationalistic, the texts fail to represent the nation. In their anxiety of Indianness, they trade the existent, vibrant, everydayness of Indian culture for some of its historical and cultural icons. The discussion of the texts in the following sections, that in different ways mark a break from this trend in IEL, in a sense, assert Bhabha's theorization of the plurality of culture in opposition to the potentially reductive discourse of nationalism. However, the delineation of culture, in these literary texts, is not devoid of *historicity*, as Bhabha would prefer.

Implicit in Bhabha's argument is a binary between *culture* and *history* where the "focus on temporality" of culture resists the "linear equivalence... that historicism proposes." In support of his argument, Bhabha repeatedly invokes Frantz Fanon's theorization of culture as an irreducible multiplicity of practices that "abhors simplification." Even though he acknowledges Fanon's debt for "liberating a certain, uncertain time of the people," Bhabha tends to evade the fact that Fanon's "uncertain time of the people" or his "zone of occult instability" is always profoundly rooted in the *history* of the people or more specifically in the histories of nationalist struggles of the colonized people. Fanon posits the plurality of cultural practices against a particular version of reductive, nationalist historiography, not against other possible versions of nationalist history, let alone against historiography itself. Fanon's famous dictum, "culture abhors simplification" is directed against the cosmopolitan intellectual or artist, who in his desire (anxiety) to identify with his people, ends up instead producing a narrative of exoticism:

When at the height of his intercourse with his people, whatever they were or whatever they are, the intellectual decides to come down into the common paths of

real life, he only brings back from his adventuring formulas which are sterile in the extreme. He sets a high value on the customs, traditions and the appearances of his people; but his inevitable painful experience only seems to be a banal search for exoticism.³²

Having thus rejected a certain kind of cultural reductivism, that disguises itself in the robe of nationalism, Fanon does not question the possibility of theorizing culture in terms of national consciousness. Unlike Bhabha, he does not posit culture in opposition to nation, but contends that the very multiplicity of people's everyday practices signify the existence of a "national culture." Fanon's is a dialogic move that synthesizes the demands of both *nation* and *culture*:

A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence.³³

The centrality of the concept of "national consciousness" in Fanon's work is reflected in Jameson's appreciation of nationalist struggles in the third world and the need to safeguard the newfound sense of identity of erstwhile colonized people against North American postmodernism or neo-imperialism. In the Indian subcontinent, nationalism indeed emerged as a progressive force that voiced the interests and aspirations of the whole nation, cutting across all social boundaries, by identifying the common enemy – British imperialism. However, after political independence, because of the nature and composition of its national bourgeoisie, nationalism in India increasingly started acquiring an exclusive elitist character.

³² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1963; New York, Grove Press 1965) 177.

³³ Fanon, 188.

This dissertation is partly an attempt to focus on the voices that were excluded from the interests that nationalism has come to embody. Thus, while Jameson's intention to uphold the voice of the colonized world is entirely salutary, it needs to be emphasized that *nationalism is not necessarily the language in which that voice speaks*.³⁴ This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that while Jameson views nationalism as an oppositional force against North American postmodernism and capitalism, in India the various shades of nationalism, ranging from the centrist to the rightist, have wholeheartedly embraced economic liberalization, the form in which North American capitalism is re-colonizing the third world.

The "difference" of the third world, which Jameson wishes to protect from the inexorable neo-imperialist march of postmodernism, cannot be achieved by evading the radical differences *within* the third world. The texts that I discuss presently, foreground the many voices in which the *nation* speaks – voices appropriated and marginalized within the discourse of *nationalism*. The identification with and celebration of a dominant version of nationalist ideology in IEL is replaced here by the enactment of a vibrant tension between nation and nationalism. Rushdie's totally unapologetic and triumphantly iconoclastic work challenges entrenched representations of nationalism in politics and literature. Occupying the discursive space opened up by Rushdie, Ghosh renders a realist form to Rushdie's magic, by locating the discontents of nationalism in the consciousness and experiences of his characters. The critique of nationalist ideology is located in the works of these authors, very much within the postcolonial realities of their nation. These

³⁴ For a cogent critique of Jameson on these lines, see Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, (London; New York: Verso, 1992).

writers thus pave the way in IEL, for the representation of what Fanon called "national culture."

Whose Nation is it Anyway?—Salman Rushdie

If the scourge of IEL has been its alleged inauthenticity as an *Indian* cultural phenomenon, then Rushdie challenges the very basis of the problem by having his protagonist, Salim Sinai in *Midnight's Children* (1980, hereafter referred to as MC),³⁵ proclaim that he *is* India. Writing in English, has not been the only, and arguably not even the most serious, basis for levying the charge of inauthenticity against Rushdie. As a Muslim, he belongs to a religious minority in India, whose nationalist loyalty, by virtue of the success of Hindu fundamentalist politics, has always remained somewhat questionable. Unlike the unenviable class position of the overwhelming majority of the Muslim population in India, however, Rushdie's background is one of fair amount of wealth and privilege. Upper class privilege, as discussed earlier, can well be viewed to be at odds with Indian nationalist rhetoric. But perhaps the gravest basis for the charge of inauthenticity against Rushdie has not been his language, his religion, or his class. It has been his expatriate status.

Rushdie moved to England at the age of fourteen, and since then has only been an occasional visitor to the subcontinent. It should not be hard to understand why a country with a recent and long history of colonialism would be suspicious of a writer residing in the West, writing largely for a Western audience claiming to speak for entire nations (India and Pakistan), and doing so in rather unflattering ways.³⁶ Rushdie himself is

³⁵ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1980; New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

³⁶ See Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World : Myths of the Nation*, (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1989) 36.

keenly aware of his subject position, and his questionable status as a spokesman for the subcontinent. In *Shame*, for instance, which more than *Midnight's Children*, articulates the author's engagement with charges of inauthenticity, the narrator is shown to be branded and dismissed with righteous anger by the Pakistani people: "Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject!... Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?"³⁷

Shame's narrator answers the charges raised against him "with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?"³⁸ The rhetorical force of such questions notwithstanding, the novel betrays a certain defensive stance on the part of the author. *Midnight's Children*, however, far from being apologetic or defensive about authorial position, sets out to expose the hollowness in all claims to authenticity of subject positions. In other words, Rushdie raises questions about the validity of the very grounds, on which he could be challenged.

The novel engages with that notion of a "unitary past," through which a nation is often imagined. Benedict Anderson points out that "because there is no Originator, the nation's biography cannot be written evangelically," the only alternative then is "found in History, or rather History emplotted in particular ways ..."³⁹ In one dominant version of Indian national history, for instance, the origins of the nation is traced back to a pristine

³⁷ Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (1983; New York: Owl Books, 1997) 21-22.

³⁸ *Midnight's Children* p. 35

³⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983) 197, 205.

Hindu past, free not only from the British, but also from the Mughals. The consequence of "emplotting History" in this way is to designate the plural character of Indian culture as inauthentic. *Midnight's Children* rejects the equation between any single identity and authentic Indianness.

Padma, the narrator's companion, is shocked by his disclosure of the identity of his biological parents: "An Anglo?" she exclaimed in horror. "What are you telling me? You are an Anglo-Indian? Your name is not your own?"⁴⁰ Saleem Sinai, raised by Ahmad and Amina, a Muslim middle class couple, protests that his name is indeed his own, even though it is also a fact that his biological parents are William Methwold an English man and Vanita a low caste Hindu woman. Through out his life, Salim Sinai is embraced by various characters ranging from Zulfikar, the Pakistani military commander to Picture Singh, the poor communist, as their own child. Salim, who himself is identified with India, thus lays claim to an amazing variety of identities: British (Methwold), low caste and poor (Vanita), business class and Muslim (Ahmad and Amina), Pakistani (Zulfikar), communist (Picture Singh). Salim's claim to multiple identities characterizes the search for origins as mythical, and more significantly, it asserts the plurality of Indian cultural and social heritage. Salim complains about the fact that the inherent multiplicity of his origin "made no difference" either to him or to his parents, and calls it a "collective failure of imagination." The complaint is of course ironic, in that the text attests to the fact that a "failure of imagination" wherein there is a refusal to be fixated on the actuality of origins, is a desirable failure.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 131

If MC questions the dominance of certain identities, claiming to be more nationalistic than others, it also offers a stringent critique of the dominance of a certain class over others. Rushdie calls it the *chamcha* class. The Hindi word *chamcha* means sycophants. Rushdie's *chamcha* class is the national bourgeoisie which took over the reins of power from the British. And in their single minded pursuit of their class interests, they did not prove to be very different from their predecessors. The class, according to Rushdie, is thus responsible for the continuance of the unscrupulous exploitation characterized by colonial rule, into the postcolonial era.⁴¹ It is in this sense that this class remains basically the *chamchas* (sycophants) of colonialism. In a rather interesting deployment of the magic realist mode, Rushdie makes this striking connection between the native ruling class and their "colonialist" aspirations. Salim, in his attempt to find an explanation for why his father, a member of the business community, was "turning white", discovers that it was a pan-Indian affliction:

All over India, I stumbled across good Indian businessmen, their fortune thriving thanks to the first Five Year Plan, which had concentrated on building up commerce ... businessmen who had become or were becoming very, very pale indeed! It seemed that the gargantuan (even heroic) efforts involved in taking over from the British and becoming masters of their own destinies had drained the color from their cheeks...in which case, perhaps my father was a late victim of a widespread, though generally unremarked phenomenon. The businessmen of India were turning white.⁴²

Its sheer greed for accumulation of material wealth is only one, and arguably not the worst, aspect of the *chamcha* class. The novel exposes the multidimensional exploitation and fraud perpetrated by the class in its desperate bid for maintaining power

⁴¹ See Rushdie's discussion of the *chamcha* class in "The Empire Writes Back with Vengeance," *The Times* 3 July, 1983: 36

⁴² *Midnight's Children*, p. 204

and control. Religious ideology has been one steady weapon that has been wielded by the class towards its nefarious ends. The Muslim elite, for instance, which whipped up religious fundamentalism for the formation of a new state, is the target of stringent attack in the novel.⁴³ Religious charlatanism is of course not the monopoly of the leaders of any one religion. The theme is best explored in the character of Cyrus, Salim's neighbor.

Cyrus' mother Mrs. Dubash turns her son into "India's richest Guru...Curus, the great" or "lord Khusro." His advertisements to attract followers is a typical instance of the outrageous fraud only too often perpetrated in the name of religion:

Know, O Unbelievers, that in the dark Midnight of CELESTIAL SPACE in a time before Time lay the sphere of blessed KHUSROVAND!!!... Leading intellectuals the world Over, also in America, speak of the ANTI-RELIGIOUS CONSPIRACY or reds, jews, etc. to hide these VITAL NEWS! The Veil lifts now. Blessed Lord Khusro comes with irrefutable proofs. Read and Believe!... send Donations to PO Box, 555, Head Post Office, Bombay-1.

Blessings! Beauty!! Truth!!⁴⁴

The portrayal of Khusro is one way in which Rushdie juxtaposes the inspiring ideals of nationhood and self-realization, against the actual operation of the *chamcha* class that controls the nation state. The novel exposes the multiple power structures and their modes of perpetuating themselves, in a newly formed nation state. "Khusro's accretious motives," Brennan observes, "prettified by his supposed devotion, exemplify in miniature the nation's use of sacred origins to achieve its real goal: a viable domestic market."⁴⁵ Any glorification of the postcolonial nation state is thus undermined by the ruthless presentation of the commercialization of various aspects of communal life

⁴³ For an excellent discussion of the novel's critique of the subcontinent's ruling class, see Tariq Ali, "Midnight's Children," *New Left Review* 136 (November-December 1982): 87-95.

⁴⁴ *Midnight's Children* p.

⁴⁵ p.96

primarily by the postcolonial ruling class in its desperate bid to consolidate its position. In its portrayal “not simply of wicked individuals, but of the collective frenzy of a desperately frightened ruling class,” Tariq Ali rightly points out, MC is “unique in Indo-English literature.”⁴⁶

Saleem Sinai, by virtue of his birth at the very moment that the country gained its Independence, is gifted with the ability to explore the mind of every other Indian. And in one of his “random processes of... mind hopping” Saleem hits upon the deeply exploitative and corrupt character of the political elite and its damaging consequences on the nation and he exclaims that he “discovered politics”:

At one time I was a landlord in Uttar Pradesh, my belly rolling over my pajama-cord as I ordered serfs to set my surplus grains on fire... at another moment I was starving to death in Orissa, where there was a food shortage as usual: I was two months old and my mother had run out of breast-milk. I occupied, briefly, the mind of a Congress party worker, bribing a village schoolteacher to throw his weight behind the party of Gandhi and Nehru in the coming election campaign....⁴⁷

Illuminating as Saleem’s visions of random corruption are, Rushdie reserves his most devastating political satire for Indira Gandhi and her political agenda. Indira Gandhi, India’s third Prime Minister and the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, is largely viewed by the left and democratic intelligentsia of the country as the leader whose reign marked a definite departure from the socialist and secular ideals of the anti-colonial movement. The country’s shift from the ideals of the anti-colonial movement has been an issue that has been repeatedly addressed by Rushdie. In an interview, Rushdie remarks on the hopes and the disillusionment that he shared about the nation’s political destiny, with so many others of his generation:

⁴⁶ Tariq Ali, 89.

⁴⁷ *Midnight’s Children* p.198

I had a sense of an ending of something in that civilization that began half a century ago with the independence of the country. The India that I was born into had a very powerful ethic which was propounded by the founding fathers of the country – Gandhi and Nehru – that was committed to democratic values, to socialism in its economic structure and to secularism.... The democratic basis of the country is under colossal threat from public corruption and the emergence of very anti-democratic political leaders.⁴⁸

In 1975, Indira Gandhi was convicted of election malpractices by a state High Court. She responded by declaring a State of Emergency by which the powers of judiciary were curtailed, all civil rights suspended and her political opponents imprisoned. For Rushdie, it was the darkest hour in the history of the nation and it is this dark moment that he vividly recreates in MC. Indira Gandhi is in fact represented as Saleem Sinai's antithetical principle. For Saleem the Widow's (his title for Indira Gandhi) primary motive in declaring a State of Emergency was to disband the MCC or the Midnight's Children's Conference convened by him.

The MCC brought together the five hundred and eighty one other children, who along with Saleem were born in the midnight hour of Indian independence. All these children, by virtue of the time of their birth, were also endowed with some special gift. The gifted children, sharing the moment of their birth with that of the nation, represented the multifarious possibilities for the new nation. And it is these diverse possibilities that threatened the Prime Minister's monomaniacal desire for power. Thus the heterogeneity of Saleem Sinai's MCC was in direct contrast to the Prime Minister's slogan: "Indira is India and India is Indira."⁴⁹ It is to protect her own "sloganized centrality,"⁵⁰ according to

⁴⁸ Salman Rushdie, interview with *New Perspectives Quarterly* 13.2 (Spring 1996) : 47-49.

⁴⁹ *Midnight's Children*, p. 491

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 491

Saleem, that she has all the Children of the Midnight hour sterilized. The reference to sterilization is of course another jab at Indira Gandhi's overzealous and undemocratic program aimed at population control. More poignantly, it refers to the sterilization of all creative possibilities for the nation's growth to satisfy one corrupt leader's craving for power.

Saleem Sinai, growing up in the sixties and seventies, is also witness to the various wars that the young Indian nation fought against its neighbors. National identity, like all identity, is strengthened by establishing its difference. And wars are perhaps the most effective means for authenticating national identity through a statement of difference. The Indian wars, viewed from the perspective of Rushdie's protagonist, expose the shallow and cynical kernel of nationalist ideology that is rejuvenated at the cost of unnecessary human suffering at a mass scale. Further, Rushdie shrewdly unmasks the mechanism by which the human cost of war is made to appear as *desirable*.

In the context of the 1962 war with China, Saleem Sinai describes the upbeat mood of the nation as the "disease of optimism".⁵¹ Afflicted with the disease of war frenzy, the people are seen to commit acts of mindless aggression against the Chinese population in the country and sanctimoniously contribute to the war funds, even as political leaders celebrate the state of war as a "new dawn" for the country:

...with optimism fever on their brows, mobs attacked Chinese shoemakers, curio dealers and restaurateurs. Burning with optimism the Government even interned Indian citizens of Chinese descent – now "enemy aliens" – in camps... When Morarji Desai, the urine-drinking Finance Minister launched his "Ornaments for Armaments" appeal, my mother handed over gold bangles and emerald ear-rings; when Morarji floated an issue of defence bonds, Ahmad Sinai bought them in bushels. War, it seemed, had brought a new dawn to India; in the *Times of India*, a cartoon captioned "War with China" showed Nehru looking at graphs labelled

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 343

"Emotional Integration," "Industrial Peace" and "People's Faith in the Government" and crying, "we never had it so good!" Adrift in the sea of optimism, we - the nation, my parents, I - floated blindly towards the reefs.⁵²

Since Independence, India has fought three wars with Pakistan, a land that was a part of India till it gained independence from colonial rule. The midnight hour that marked India's Independence was also the moment when the country was partitioned into two autonomous states. Rushdie, like millions of other Indians, has belonged to both countries at one time or another. The fact of shared history and culture renders a special poignancy to the bitter animosity between India and Pakistan and perhaps that is the reason that Rushdie's satirical delineation of India's wars with Pakistan has a keener edge.

Saleem Sinai is in Pakistan with his family during the 1965 war, but he tends to support the Indian cause as he feels a stronger emotional bond with the country of his birth. He, checks himself, however, from supporting either side with an observation that undercuts the truth claims of not only India and Pakistan but of all warring states in any given situation: "Be fair! Nobody, no country, has a monopoly of untruth!"⁵³ The overzealous rhetoric of nationalism that is especially whipped up during periods of war is ruthlessly ridiculed as Saleem recalls the "glorious defense" of Lahore by Pakistanis in the 1971 war:

...old men, young boys, irate grandmothers fought the Indian Army, bridge by bridge they battled, with any available weapons! Lame men loaded their pockets with grenades, pulled out the pins, flung themselves beneath advancing Indian tanks; toothless old ladies disembowelled Indian babus with pitch-forks! Down to the last man and child, they died; but Martyrs, Padma! Heroes bound for the

⁵² Ibid., p. 343

⁵³ Ibid., p. 373

perfumed Garden! Where the men would be given four beauteous hours,
untouched by man or djinn; and the women, four equally virile males!⁵⁴

MC exposes not only the mass delusion that is generated by the ideology of war but also portrays the senseless brutality and exploitation that is as much a part of that ideology. Rushdie has been severely critical of the Pakistani oppression of its Bengali minority in its Eastern province. The novel graphically depicts the atrocities perpetrated by the Pakistani army on the Bengali population that was fighting for autonomy in 1971:

...soldiers entering women's hostels without knocking; women dragged into the street, were also entered, and again nobody troubled to knock. And newspaper offices, burning with the dirty yellowblack smoke of cheap gutter newsprint, and the offices of trade unions, smashed to the ground, and roadside ditches filling up with people who were not merely asleep...⁵⁵

Saleem Sinai, by the time he is thirty, has thus been witness to the slow but sure degeneration of the hopes and dreams of the nation. Soon after his birth, he had received a letter from Nehru that had signified his intrinsic connection with the nation: "You are the newest bearer of the ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be in a sense, the mirror of our own." Saleem honors his symbiotic connection with the nation with his attempts to preserve and nurture the inherent plurality of the nation. It is towards this end that he convenes the MCC, that is disbanded by "the widow." Saleem is thus repeatedly thwarted in his ambitions. By the time he is thirty, Saleem is "battered by history, castrated by a Prime Minister, thoroughly disillusioned and 'fullofcracks.'"⁵⁶ His life indeed mirrors that of the nation.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 389

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 410

⁵⁶ Josna E. Rege "Victim into Protagonist? 'Midnight's Children' and the Post-Rushdie National Narratives of the Eighties," *Studies in the Novel* 29.3 (Fall 1997): 342-374.

Before he completely falls apart, Saleem makes one last attempt to retain some shred of hope, that might preserve some possibilities, for the future of his nation. And the only process that ensures "preservation," Saleem discovers, is that of "pickling." In the last days of his tale, Saleem starts to work at Mary Pereira's (his old governess) pickle factory and discovers "that to pickle is to give immortality."⁵⁷ He has been obsessed too long, he feels, with the purity and singularity of his own hopes and dreams, that were not to be. If his visions were to last, if they had to be preserved in any way, then they would have to be pickled: "after all fish, vegetables, fruit hang embalmed in spice-and-vinegar; a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste is a small matter, surely?"⁵⁸ He spells out the redeeming virtues that pickling has for the future of the nation:

Symbolic value of the pickling process: all the six hundred million eggs which gave birth to the population of India could fit inside a single, standard-sized pickle-jar; six hundred million spermatozoa could be lifted on a single spoon. Every pickle jar (you will forgive me if I become florid for a moment) contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time!⁵⁹

Eloquent as Saleem's ode to the "chutnification of history" is, it still falls a little short of signaling a sense of real alternative. Perhaps the metaphor of one empty jar, yet to be filled with the pickle of history, is not enough to assuage the sense of disillusionment that is generated by the intense and assiduous narration of thirty years of actual history. The pickling of history, however, is not all that is offered to us by the end of the novel.

⁵⁷ *Midnight's Children*, p. 531

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.531

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 529

Saleem's greatest fear, he confesses early in his life, is of absurdity, and it is thus that he desperately attempts to make some sense of it all. The one way out of absurdity for him is to narrate his own story, which is also the story of his nation and above all it is his own unique version of history. And it is this very act of narration and the exceptional perspective of the narrator that implies the presence of possibility and alternative. In the final analysis, the text itself signifies that not all has been lost in the ravages of history wrought upon the nation.

The Nation and the World--Amitav Ghosh

The sense of nationhood in IEL is constructed, Mukherjee observed, by a dual move. On the one hand the writers glossed over or underplayed differences and contradictions within the nation and on the other, they accentuated differences and the unique characteristics of the nation in relation to the rest of the world.⁶⁰ Rushdie departed from this convention primarily by his relentless depiction of all the contradictions that constitute the nation. However, even as he presents a ruthless critique of postcolonial India, he does not challenge the convention in IEL of depicting the "uniqueness" of the nation. Rushdie has an intense emotional investment in the political category called India and his critique, in some crucial senses, flows precisely from this investment in the nation. Thus even as the particular direction that postcolonial India is taking is questioned, the entity called India is not.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh challenges the convention of portraying the nation as a unique entity by designating the lines that demarcate nations as "shadowy" or unreal. The metaphor of shadow lines in the novel refers not only to the contestable

⁶⁰ "The Anxiety of Indianness," 2608.

boundaries between lands but also to other fences that seek to separate imagination and reality, past and present, memory and desire. However, the organizing structure of the novel is such that the various shadow lines converge to focus on the central category of interrogation – the shadow lines between nations.

The story unfolds through the recollections of the unnamed narrator, of his life and experiences, surrounded by his extended family and friends. The two figures that have the strongest influence on the child narrator are his Grandmother and Tridib, a distant relative. The critique of nationalism in the novel emerges through the contrasting characters and ideologies of these two figures. The child narrator is strongly attached to his Grandmother and accepts the strict disciplinary training that she tries to impose on him, much as any child would accept the impositions of a basically well-intentioned and loving adult. However, it is Tridib with his extraordinary worldview that holds sway over the young narrator's imagination. Tridib and Grandmother represent two antithetical principles, two divergent ways of approaching reality. The novel, almost unequivocally, affirms Tridib's position over that of Grandmother's. Yet, Grandmother remains very much within the sympathetic range of the novel.

It is significant that Grandmother, in whom the narrator has a strong emotional investment, is also the repository of the ideology that is the primary target of critique of the novel. This double move allows the narrator to effectively expose the insidiousness of nationalist ideology and its prevalence as a "regular middle class" worldview. An approach to life, like that of Grandmother's, is shown to be most strongly characterized, by the way it normalizes difference, be they based on nationality or class. Her worldview is situated within the larger context of a life that has withstood massive emotional and

economic hardships in an unsympathetic society. Widowed at an early age, she strives against all societal odds to maintain an independent existence for herself and her son. Her middle class status is the result of a life of struggles and because of that, she believes that she can never afford to take her class position for granted. Her not so subtle denigration of people from the lower classes betrays her anxiety to guard her own class status. Thus when the narrator's mother wishes to help a relative, who is not doing too well financially, Grandmother stops her saying, "once these people start making demands, it never ends."⁶¹ It is the same sense of insecurity and prejudice that marks her spirited embrace of nationalism.

Grandmother's attitude to Tridib further defines her character, at the same time as shedding light on their different and distinct approaches to life. Tridib's generally bohemian life style is anathema to Grandmother. Unlike his globetrotting family, Tridib chooses to stay on in the family's old and crumbling ancestral house in Calcutta. He is working on a Ph.D. in Archaeology, which Grandmother could normally respect, had there been the prospect of a "named professorship" at the end of it, but there is no such hope with Tridib. One of her major complaints against Tridib is that he had not taken advantage of his well-connected father to make a life for himself with a "respectable career." The fact that Tridib did not get along well with his father does not seem like even a remotely acceptable reason to her. That somebody would allow something so frivolous as their "likes and dislikes" to interfere with the "business of fending for oneself in the world"⁶² make them odd and irresponsible to her. What makes her really wary of Tridib

⁶¹ *Shadow Lines* p. 136

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 6

is that she had spotted him a few times at street corner tea-stall *addas*⁶³ hanging out with, what she sees as other good-for-nothings like him, whiling away his time. She has a “deep horror” of such young people, or “fail cases”⁶⁴ who have nothing better to do with their time. After all, the proper use of time, is for her, the essence of success, “time,” she believes, is “like a toothbrush: it went mouldy, if it wasn’t used.” And when asked by her curious grandson what happened to wasted time, her reply is “it begins to stink.”⁶⁵ The narrator’s fascination for Tridib proceeds from the fact that Tridib effortlessly challenges Grandmother’s whole worldview: “[t]hat was why I loved to listen to Tridib: he never seemed to use his time, but his time didn’t stink.”⁶⁶

Grandmother’s aggressive nationalism is in consonance with her middle-class world of caution and class, always armed to protect itself from what she views to be threatening vagaries of imagination or indulgence. If she constantly feels the need to protect and define herself against the lower classes to guard her middle-class self-image, her nationalism ensures the same protection and self-definition against imagined enemies across the borders. This is reflected in her seemingly innocuous, but potentially threatening views like “you can’t build a strong country without building a strong body.”⁶⁷ Her views are underpinned by a glorification of violence and machismo in the

⁶³ The Bengali word *adda* refers to an established cultural practice of friends getting together for long, unrigorous conversations. For an interesting socio-historical discourse on the subject, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “*Adda: A History of Sociality*,” *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp.180-213.

⁶⁴ *Shadow Lines* Ibid., p. 7

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 4

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 4

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 8

larger interest of the nation. Thus she lauds England's long history of "war and bloodshed" to her grandson, the narrator:

It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lived there has earned his right to be there with blood; with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood... War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to do for India, don't you see?⁶⁸

Her desire to see an India united by blood is underpinned by a hysterical sense of insecurity and potential danger. And it is this hysterical aspect of her nationalism that comes to the fore during India's war with China in 1962, when, in a fit of frenzy, she declares "we have to kill them before they kill us."⁶⁹

Ila, the narrator's cousin, characterizes Grandmother as a "warmongering fascist."⁷⁰ Ila herself is a globetrotting, cosmopolitan activist for politically correct causes. But she is said to live in a world of moral absolutes and "context had no place in her judgments."⁷¹ It falls to Tridib to provide a contextualized understanding of Grandmother's worldview. "No, she was not a fascist," Tridib would say, her views, according to him, had a different motivation:

[S]he was only a modern middle-class woman.... All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle-classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 77-78

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 237

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 78

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 82

power: that was all she wanted- a modern middle-class life, a small thing that history had denied her in all its fullness and for which she could never forgive it.⁷²

Tridib's evaluation of Grandmother, even as it is more context-sensitive than Ila's assessment of her, is the more alarming of the two. Warmongering fascists (as Ila describes Grandmother) are after all, not commonplace, and are therefore easy to dismiss. What makes Tridib's designation more sinister, is the casual way he normalizes Grandmother's worldview by pointing to its prevalence and acceptance "the world over." He characterizes her desires as seemingly innocent and unassuming: "this is all she wanted..." And yet the novel itself testifies to the fact that there is nothing innocent or unassuming in this middle-class desire for "self-respect and national power."

Even as Grandmother remains a virulent advocate for nationalist ideology, her own life associated with different parts of the subcontinent exposes the arbitrariness of nationalism. She was born and raised in the Eastern part of Bengal, which seceded from India as part of Pakistan in 1947. Fifteen years after the Partition of the country, she finds out that her uncle is alive and still living in their ancestral house in Dacca, East Pakistan. She feels charged with the mission of "rescuing" him from an "alien country." Ironically, the "alien country" is the country where her uncle had lived his whole life apart from the fact that it is also the country of her own origin. But because of her deep conviction that national boundaries are based on real differences, "she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality."⁷³ The fact that her old uncle was in Pakistan, instead of India, was also to her part of the "mess," and she sets it upon herself to correct it.

⁷² Ibid., p. 78

⁷³ Ibid., p. 152

The climactic events in Dacca expose the disquieting underside of the identification with what the narrator calls "large abstract entities" like nations. Grandmother makes a special trip to Dacca, to bring her uncle back "home" to India. Once there, she tries to convince her old uncle that it is not safe for him, a Hindu, to be staying in Pakistan, and that he has to move while he can. Her uncle, however, has other views:

Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to?... As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here.⁷⁴

And yet, as events take shape, the uncle does need to be rescued at one point, and that too not in India, but in Dacca itself. Grandmother spots her uncle at a street near his house just as a frenzied mob charged with sectarian passions is about to attack him. At the time, she is in a car with her family. Now that he really needs to be rescued, her response is instructive. Recalling the events, seventeen years later, May, a common friend, recalls to the narrator, "Your grandmother wanted to drive away."⁷⁵ Sensing that the mob could also prove to be potentially dangerous for herself and her family, she chooses to avert that risk and rather see her uncle being attacked and killed. It is a remarkable feat of the novel that the two actions of Grandmother--first, traveling to another country to "save" her uncle and second, refusing to reach out to him in his actual hour of need--do not appear to be inconsistent. Her nationalism, we are given to understand, is not antithetical to her narrow sense of self-interest and insecurity. Indeed it is the latter that often lies at the very heart of nationalist ideology.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 215

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 250

It is perhaps fitting in the novelistic scheme of things that Tridib, who in essence represents the alternative to Grandmother's world view, loses his own life, trying to save the uncle from the mob. The novel charts the progression of the narrator's life into adulthood but it is not a chronological narration of events. Thus, even though the narrator is only twelve at the time of the Dacca episode, he learns the facts about Tridib's death as an adult, at the very end of the novel. However, it is Tridib's real and haunting presence that, in some crucial senses, encapsulates the guiding wisdom of the novel.

In place of the various *differences* erected by space and time, Tridib posits *desire*. The narrator recalls that as a child, even though he had not traveled beyond a few miles of Calcutta, Tridib had given him "worlds to travel in and ... eyes to see them with." The problem of distance, Tridib had taught him, was something that could be conquered, not so much through travel, but through desire and a precise use of one's imagination. The distance and the difference between the Self and the Other, between "oneself and one's image in the mirror" could only be overcome through "a longing for every thing that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places..."⁷⁶ Ila, who unlike the narrator, had actually traveled to distant and remote parts of the world, objects to Tridib's gospel of desire and imagination. "Why," she asks of the narrator, "why should we try, why not take the world as it is?"⁷⁷ To that, the narrator could only go back to Tridib, who would have said that there *is* "no world as it is." If we didn't try to desire and imagine our own reality, "the

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 29

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 31

alternative wasn't blankness – it only meant... that we would never be free of other people's inventions."⁷⁸

Tridib's insistence on the reinvention of reality signifies the alternative to Grandmother's world order of naturalized differences. The adult narrator's interrogation of the principles on which nations are formed, as well as of nationalist historiography, affirms Tridib's wisdom over that of Grandmother's. The novel has been both lauded and critiqued for its ideological stance on nationalism. Robert Dixon, for instance, celebrates the work for its critique of a "culture rooted in a single place" and instead positing "a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries."⁷⁹ A. N. Kaul, however, takes issue with the novel for those very reasons, which motivate Dixon to praise it. Critiquing what he calls a "too simplistic view of historical reality" that calls "nations 'inventions,'" Kaul asks: "How can Ghosh be interested in the real possibilities and the real difficulties of going beyond national divisions... when for him they scarcely exist?"⁸⁰

It is interesting that even as Dixon and Kaul subscribe to different political positions on the issue of nationalism, their critiques proceed from a common assumption about the novel. They agree that *The Shadow Lines* chooses not to recognize the full political import of nations and nationalist ideology. While Dixon holds that Ghosh's choice allows him to explore other realities, Kaul finds in it an "evasion" of political realities. I would like to contend, however, that the assumption that the novel does not

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 31

⁷⁹ Dixon, Robert. "'Travelling in the West': The Writing of Amitav Ghosh," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* XXXI.1 (1996): 10.

⁸⁰ A. N. Kaul, "A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*," Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, p. 303

fully acknowledge and engage with the political reality of nations and nationalism, needs to be challenged. The novel quite clearly appreciates the political and ideological import of nationalist ideology. What it does not do, however, is endorse that ideology.

Tridib has been viewed by various critics of the novel to be the alter ego of the narrator and even the ur-hero of the novel.⁸¹ Even though there may be reasons for such a reading, it needs to be contended that the political statement that the novel makes does not completely derive from Tridib's "transcendent wisdom." It is the adult narrator's *political translation* of Tridib's views, that is the real signal towards a radically different perspective on history and politics. For the narrator, the "invention of one's own reality" is not a subjective or voluntarist goal. Such invention was necessary, according to Tridib, if one wanted to be free of other people's inventions. But the freedom from other, more powerful versions of reality, can often be accomplished, the narrator realizes, only in a politically contested arena. The precondition to the realization of one's own version of reality is therefore an engagement with other, more accepted versions. It is thus that the narrator explores, in vivid and agonizing detail, some of the more questionable aspects of nationalist ideology.

Fifteen years after Tridib's death, the narrator flips through the pages of an old Bartholomew's Atlas, "trying to learn the meaning of distance."⁸² His reflections render poignancy to the perhaps obvious fact, that distance is determined much more by national boundaries, than by the relative geographic location of areas. He wonders at the fact, for

⁸¹ See Verlyn Klinlenborg, "Life On The Edge," rev. of *The Shadow Lines*, *The New Republic* August, 7 & 14 (1989): 38; Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*," Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, pp.265-66; A. n. Kaul, p. 307

⁸² *Shadow Lines*, p. 232

instance, that Chiang Mai in Thailand is much nearer to Calcutta, the city where he had grown up. But he had never before heard of Chiang Mai. Yet he had always known about Delhi which is much further away from Calcutta than Chiang Mai because Delhi, unlike the city in Thailand, is part of India. Nation states thus have the power to render physical proximity meaningless and instead construct identities that elicit loyalties based on contestable, if not arbitrary, lines of demarcation. The one event, the narrator realizes, in a frightening flash, in which people across national boundaries can have a strong and shared investment, is war. It is as if "there were only states and citizens: there were no people at all."⁸³ The construction of national identities is made possible then only at the expense of other identities and relationships. For the political logic of nation states require, that "to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples."⁸⁴

National identity not only marginalizes all other identities and relationships of people *across* nations, it also requires the suppression of contradictions and contesting identities *within* the nation. In one of the defining moments of the novel, the narrator finds that his memories of a particularly traumatic social event in his childhood, were not shared by any of his friends. His memories were of a religious riot that he had witnessed as a child but it was an event that none of his friends remembered. They all did have, however, distinct memories of another event, which had taken place two years before the riots remembered by the narrator. It was the 1962 Indian war with China. The war, as the narrator's friend observes, was after all, "the most important thing that happened in the

⁸³ Ibid., p. 233

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 230

country" at that time, and a riot, on the other hand is a "local thing... hardly comparable to a war."⁸⁵ The narrator, however, refuses to accept his friend's reasoning. He intuitively realizes that the acceptance of his friend's line of reasoning would mean the appropriation of his own memories by the logic of the state.

The only way to legitimize his memories, the narrator realizes, is to lend concrete historical form to them. Thus he embarks on an archival journey, to reconstruct the events around the 1964 riots. His explorations reveal that the riots hardly received any media attention, and had thus left no traces in public memory. And yet, the actual number of people killed in it were "not very many less than were killed in the war of 1962."⁸⁶ The telling silence about the riots then proceeds, not from the fact of their lack of importance, as the narrator's friend believes, the reason lies elsewhere. Riots, unlike wars, do not affirm and assert national identity; instead they question its validity. They point to the presence of social and political tensions that lie outside the homogenizing logic of the nation. And that which contradicts the all-encompassing ideology of the nation is all too often relegated to a chasm of silence.

And yet, if there is any one thing, that characterizes and distinguishes the recent history of the subcontinent, it would have to be the ominous implications of the politics of religious identity. To the extent that nationalist historiography marginalizes this fact, it falsifies the history of the region. Thus, it is extremely significant that the narrator chooses to rescue the history of the 1964 riots, from the jaws, as it were, of the more powerful nationalist history of the 1962 war. The narrator connects the experience of the

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 220

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 229

terror that had gripped him as a child, in a school bus, in the midst of the riot, with the larger historical experience of the subcontinent:

That particular fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe.... It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the street that one inhabits, can become suddenly and without warning as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world – not language, not food, not music – it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror.⁸⁷

The narrator's friend had dismissed the significance of this memory of the riot, for riots were after all, he had said, a local matter. Earlier in the novel, Ila, serenely confident of the centrality of her own political and geographic location, had similarly proclaimed that the "famines and riots and disasters" that happened in the backwaters of the world, did not really compare with the significance of "revolutions and anti-fascist wars" that set political examples to the world. These views are not all that distinct from Grandmother's, who had a passionate faith in the global significance of the Nation and of national identity.

It is in response to the combined force of this all too prevalent and powerful world-view that the narrator chooses to place his "local and unimportant" experience of fear in a larger historical context. In doing so, he makes a crucial political statement. The ideology of nationalism is exposed for its suppression of myriad personal and political events and experiences. And his experience, like famines and riots and disasters is constitutive of the "silence of voiceless events in a backward world,"⁸⁸ that need to be retrieved from the annals of the histories of revolutions and nationalist wars. Against the awe-inspiring

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 204

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 104

might of nationalist ideology, the narrator posits the actuality of people and politics, which that ideology so often seeks to suppress.

Ghosh's work is characterized by its grim appreciation of the force of nationalist ideology in the contemporary world. The challenge to nationalism in the novel, however, ensues not from the critical perspective of a dispassionate observer but emerges from the lives and experiences of culturally rooted characters. The remarkable characterization of the Grandmother as a figure at once deserving unequivocal ideological censure and yet inciting sympathy and understanding captures the insidious ubiquity of nationalist ideology. If nationalism is situated right in the midst of postcolonial culture, the critique of this all-pervasive ideology also emerges from the same site. The adult narrator's questioning of nationalist ideology is rooted in the individual and social experiences of the nation's recent past and its present.

In contradistinction to a dominant view of nationalism, Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* asserts that the critique of nationalism need not be antithetical to the affirmation of sociocultural specificities. Indeed it shows it is the homogenizing logic of nationalism that likes to erase both cultural and political differences within the nation and construct arbitrary divisions across nations. Thus the rejection of nationalism in the novel is not so much a flight from reality as some critics have argued; instead it is an attempt to imagine reality in a different way.

Conclusion: National Consciousness Sans Nationalism

While working on this essay, I came across the news that Amitav Ghosh had been selected as a finalist for the 2001 Commonwealth Prize for literature for his latest novel, *The Glass Palace*, and that in a letter addressed to the Commonwealth Foundation,

Ghosh requested that his name be withdrawn from the competition.⁸⁹ The reasons for his special request are instructive for our present discussion. In his letter, he calls the phrase “commonwealth literature” a misnomer, as it excludes “the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries.” The phrase does not refer to the present realities of the countries in question, nor could it possibly refer to a vision for the future. It is rooted, Ghosh observes, only “within a disputed aspect of the past.” In a brilliant aside, he further illustrates the inappropriateness of the phrase by asking whether it would not be really strange, “if that familiar category “English Literature” were to be renamed ‘the literature of Norman Conquest?’”

His novel, Ghosh writes, became eligible for the Prize for two reasons, first that it is written in English, and second, that he happened to belong to a region that was once ruled by Imperial Britain. And these reasons, he submits, are for him the least persuasive ones for judging the merit of a book. His gesture is not a denial of a certain past, but an assertion that “the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time: they are also open to choice, reflection and judgment.” So he believes that he would be betraying the spirit of his book if he allowed it to be incorporated “within that particular memorialization of Empire that passes under the rubric of ‘the Commonwealth.’” It needs to be remarked that Rushdie, too has protested the category of “Commonwealth Literature.” In his essay, “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist,” he observes that the category obscures the commonality “about much literature in many

⁸⁹ Amitav Ghosh, Letter to the Commonwealth Foundation, 18th. March, 2001
<http://www.amitavghosh.com/cwprize.html#letter>

languages, emerging from those parts of the world which one could loosely term the less powerful, or the less powerless.”⁹⁰

The opposition to the category of Commonwealth draws attention to the persistent division of the world into unequal power blocks. Organizations like the Commonwealth continue to symbolically undermine the sovereignty of erstwhile colonized nations in a postcolonial world. The rejection of the category by writers like Ghosh and Rushdie foregrounds the significance of the right to self-representation, denied to a part of the world for too long. It thereby signals their identification with the experiences and aspirations of their nation and indeed with that of the whole postcolonial world.

The fact, that one of the reasons, for which Ghosh objects to the Commonwealth Prize is because of its refusal to acknowledge literatures in languages other than English, has an added significance. It marks his solidarity with the numerous writers writing in the vernacular in India and through out the postcolonial world. By doing so, Ghosh helps resolve the long conflictual relationship between IEL and literature in regional languages. With his striking gesture, he makes the point that the use of the colonizer’s language need not and should not be viewed as a sign of complicity with the politics of colonialism.

Finally, the stand against the category of “Commonwealth Literature” lays out the political implications of the present trend in IEL of questioning nationalism. IEL remained wedded to nationalist ideology for a long time, as the desirability of that ideology was viewed to be unquestionable. For it was nationalism, that had marked the death knell of colonialism. The ideology of nationalism, when challenged by third world writers like Rushdie and Ghosh, elicits some legitimate political misgivings. It is feared,

⁹⁰ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London, Granta Books : 1991) p. 68

for instance, that questioning nationalism might be an invitation to some kind of facile internationalism, underwritten by new forms of power structures. The political import of Ghosh's letter helps assuage such misgivings. It indicates that nationalist ideology can be questioned, without foregoing solidarity with the nation. The present direction in IEL, then, may be viewed as being in consonance with Fanon's call for national consciousness without nationalism.⁹¹

⁹¹ *The Wretched of The Earth*, 199

AFTERWORD

In the last couple of years, while I have been working on this project, hundreds of thousands of ordinary people in various parts of the world lost their lives in the name of nations and nationalism. In the morning of September 11th 2001, I was working on the chapter on Indian English literature, when I heard a thunderous explosion--the World Trade Center was attacked a few blocks away from our apartment building in lower Manhattan. The horrifying event brought back a familiar feeling. Delhi, where I grew up, had become a target of regular terror attacks since the late eighties by groups demanding regional autonomy. For us, living with the grim consequences of the reprehensible tactic of terrorizing people to pressure the state did not obviate the fact that the demands expressed by "terrorists" are political in nature and need to be resolved as such. Indeed in our contemporary times, people in large parts of the world are familiar with the logic of "terrorism." But this time it was different. Because this, as one is reminded with jarring frequency, is America!

In the name of fighting *terror*, the richest and strongest nation in the world is at this time wreaking mass destruction on people and infrastructure in a poor, weak, third world country. Colonialism and racism are strangely reincarnated as a white occupying army claims to "liberate" a brown people. The theorists of *Empire* would perhaps wish to revise one of their central claims in the post-9/11 world: "*The United States of America does not, and indeed no nation state can today, form the center of an imperialist project.*"

Imperialism is over"¹ (emphasis in original). Hardt and Negri's basic argument about the increasing redundancy of the nation-state in the alleged new world order of "empire" remains thoroughly questionable. They claim that the new global economy, dominated by transnational corporations and global institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, is marked by a radical decline in the significance of the nation-state. In actuality, however, the unhindered operation of transnationals requires an actual strengthening of the nation-state. The capitalist nation-state, as a critic of *Empire* observes, now needs to be "capable of denationalizing industries, abolishing social welfare programs and labor regulations, generally deregulating their capital, labor and commodities markets, and containing challenges from below. Put simply, rather than representing a simple shift of political powers 'upward' from the nation-state to the 'global juridico-economic bodies', the development of the WTO, EU, and the like actually enhance the role of the nation-state."² The neo-imperialism of the world's lone super-power is consistent with the enhanced role of the nation state. This economic and ideological restructuring of the nation within the new world order highlights what Phillip Wegner calls the "illusory nature of the nation-state's imagined historical closure: the nation-state is always already part of a *world system*, its particular spatial bounding and collective subjectivity formed in relationship to the other "elements" composing such a system."³

It is of absolute significance that nations should not be equated with their governments. Nationalist ideology tries hard to make that equation, attempting first to

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2000) p. xiii-xiv

² Charlie Post, "A Critical Look at *Empire*" *Against The Current* 17.3 July/August (2002)

³ Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities : Utopia, The Nation, And The Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) p. 57

reject and then to appropriate difference and dissent. The dismissal if not contempt for civil society, it needs to be said, is shared alike by nationalist and terrorist ideologies. In the context of the US "war" on Iraq, Arundhati Roy, novelist and activist and a bitter critic of US foreign policy, points out the need to separate governments from their people:

The Coalition of the Bullied and Bought consists of governments, not people. More than one third of America's citizens have survived the relentless propaganda they've been subjected to, and many thousands are actively fighting their own government. In the ultra-patriotic climate that prevails in the US, that's as brave as an Iraqi fighting for his or her homeland.

While the "Allies" wait in the desert for an uprising of Shia Muslims on the streets of Basra, the real uprising is taking place in hundreds of cities across the world. It has been the most spectacular display of public morality ever seen.

Most courageous of all, are the hundreds of thousands of American people on the streets of America's great cities -Washington, New York, Chicago, San Francisco. The fact is that the only institution in the world today that is more powerful than the American government, is American civil society.⁴

This dissertation has primarily attempted to assert the autonomy of civil society. Nationalism, the most dominant ideology of our times, I have argued, tends always to suppress that autonomy. Nationalist ideology is thus constituted by the debilitating contradiction of repressing the interests and aspirations of the very people that it allegedly represents. The dominance of nationalism, however, has not translated into hegemony. The rejection of the totalizing logic of nationalist ideology, as this project tries to show, is embedded in the culture and institutions of civil society.

⁴ Arundhati Roy, "Mesopotamia. Babylon. The Tigris and Euphrates" *The Guardian* 2 April, 2003

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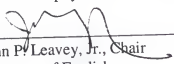
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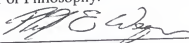
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nivedita Majumdar was born in Calcutta. She moved to Delhi in early childhood with her family and spent most of her life there. After finishing her BA (Hons.) degree from Kirorimal College, Delhi University, she went on to complete her MA and M. Phil in English also from Delhi University. She came to the University of Florida to pursue her doctoral degree. By some chance, if she gets a job in academia, she plans to live happily ever after teaching and researching.

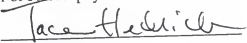
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John P. Leavey, Jr., Chair
Professor of English

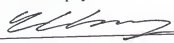
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Phillip E. Wegner
Associate Professor of English

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Tace Hedrick
Assistant Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.


Frederick Corney
Assistant Professor of History

This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Dean, Graduate School